Weird Tales

OCT.

ISLE OF THE UNDEAD

By

LLOYD ARTHUR ESHBACH

C. L. Moore

Robert Bloch

Dorothy Quick

Robert E. Howard

25c

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"One hand closed on his thin neck, and the other, a rock-like fist, made a bloody ruin of his mouth."

Isle of the Undead

By LLOYD ARTHUR ESHBACH

A gripping, thrilling, uncanny tale about the frightful fate that befell a yachting party on the dreadful island of living dead men

1. A Horror from the Past

A DRAB gray sheet of cloud slipped stealthily from the moon's round face, like a shroud slipping from the face of one long dead, a coldly phosphorescent face from which the eyes had been plucked. Yellow radiance fell toward a calm, oily sea, seeking a narrow bank of fog lying low on the water, penetrating its somber mass like frozen yellow fingers.

Vilma Bradley shuddered and shrank against Clifford Darrell's brawny form. "It's—it's ghastly, Cliff!" she said.

"Ghastly?" Darrell leaned against the rail, laughing softly. "One cocktail too many—that's the answer. It's given you the jitters. Listen!" Faintly from the salon came strains of dance music and the rhythmic shuffle of feet. "A nifty yacht, a South Sea moon, a radio dance orchestra, dancers—and little Clifford! And you call it ghastly!" Almost savagely his arms tightened about her, and the bantering note left his voice. "I'm crazy about you, Vilma."

She tried to laugh, but it was an unconvincing sound. "It's the moon, Cliff—I guess. I never saw it like that before.

Something's going to happen—something dreadful. I just *know* it!"

"Oh—be sensible, Vilma!" There was a hint of impatience in Cliff's deep voice. A gorgeous girl in his arms—dark-haired, dark-eyed, made for love—and she talked of dreadful things which were going to happen because the moon looked screwy.

She released herself and glanced out over the sea. "I know I'm silly, but——" Her voice froze and her slender body stiffened. "Cliff—look!"

Darrell spun around, and as he stared, he felt a dryness seeping into his throat, choking him. . . .

Out of the winding-sheet of fog into the moonlight crept a strange, strange craft, her crumbling timbers blackened and rotted with incredible age. The corpse of a ship, she seemed, resurrected from the grave of the sea. Her prow thrust upward like a simitar bent backward, hovering over the gaunt ruin of a cabin whose seaward sides were formed by port and starboard bows. From a shallow pit amidships jutted the broken arm of a mast, its splintered tip pointing toward the blindly watching moon. The stern, thickly covered with the moldering encrustations of age, curved inward above the strange high poop, beneath which lay another cabin. And along either side of her worm-eaten freeboard ran a row of apertures like oblong portholes. Out of these projected great oars, long, unwieldy, as somberly black as the rest of the ancient hulk.

Now a sound drifted across the waters, the steady, rhythmic *br-rr-oom, br-rr-oom, br-rr-oom* of a drum beating time for the rowers. Its hollow thud checked the heart, set it to throbbing in tempo with its own weary pulse. Ghostly fingers, dripping dread, crawled up Darrell's spine.

Stiff-lipped, Vilma gasped: "What—what is it?"

Cliff answered in a dry husky voice, the words seeming to trip over an awkward tongue. "It's—it's—it *can't* be, damn it! —but it's a galley, a ship from the days of Alexander the Great! What's it doing —here—*now?*"

Closer she came through the moon-path, a frothing lip of brine curling away from her swelling prow. Closer—her course crossing that of the *Ariel*—and the watchers saw her crew! They gasped, and the blood ebbed from their faces.

Men of ancient Persia, clad in leather kirtles and rusted armor, and they were hideous! In the yellow moon-glow Cliff could see them clearly now—a lookout standing motionless in the stem, the steersman on the poop-deck, the drummer squatting beside the broken mast, the rowers in the pit—and all, *all* were a bloodless white, the skin of their faces puffed and bloated and horribly wrinkled, like flesh that had been under water a long time.

Dead men . . . men whose movements were stiffly wooden . . . as dead as their faces. But most horrible was the fact that they were there, that they moved at all!

"A queer mirage, isn't it?" A hollow voice spoke suavely behind them.

Vilma gasped at the sudden sound, and they whirled. A foot away stood the tall, lean figure of the *Ariel's* captain, Leon Corio. A queer smile twisted his thin lips.

"What's the idea—sneaking up on us?" Darrell demanded angrily. He didn't like this man, hadn't liked him from the moment he had approached Cliff to sell him the yacht. But Cliff had bought the craft because she was a bargain, and in accordance with their agreement he had hired Corio as captain.

The tall man's smile remained fixed, and he bowed gravely. "Sorry, sir. I always walk softly. A habit, I suppose."

He gestured toward the galley. "It looks quite life-like, don't you think so?"

"Life-like?" Cliff spoke between his teeth as he again faced the black ship. "It looks *dead* to me!"

The galley had almost reached them *now, veering sharply to draw up beside* the *Ariel*. The drum quieted, and the oars trailed in the water, motionless except for the swaying imparted by the waves. A musty, age-old odor filtered through the air like a breath from a grave. The music and dancing had stopped. A fear-filled hush shrouded the yacht.

Vilma drew Cliff's arm about her shoulder. He glanced back at the motionless captain.

"*Do* something, Corio!" he rasped. "Don't stand there like a dummy!"

Corio nodded with his same queer smile. His hand darted to an inside pocket, came out bearing a curious instrument like four twisted cones of silver bound together with silver thongs. As he raised this to his mouth, his eyelids were slits behind which burned the embers of his eyes.

Out over the sea crept a single note, deep, hollow, laden with eery minor wailings—a sound that summoned imperatively, yet a sound that repelled. It was a moan, hideous as the moan of a dying demon. It raked the heart with fear-tipped claws. It rose, and fell, and rose again, and as it died, it awakened the crew of the ancient galley to motion, sweeping them in a horde to the rail of the yacht.

Cliff swung toward Corio in bursting fury, fury mingled with dread. His fist lashed out at that glittering silver instrument and the face behind it, but Corio avoided him like a wraith, still smiling fixedly, the horn again at his lips. Cliff cursed, and hurled himself through the air. One hand caught a bony shoulder; he felt fingers like hooks close on his own throat. He wrenched free, landing a stunning blow on Corio's face—saw him reel and crash to the deck—and then he heard Vilma scream!

He whirled. She was struggling be*tween two of the flabby-faced things from* the galley! In an instant he was upon them, his fist thudding against icy flesh, burying itself in something horribly soft and yielding. Startled, Cliff swung a second blow; and an arm, tomb-cold and strong as the tentacle of an octopus, wrapped itself around him—a vise of thin-covered bone! A dead, drowned face peered over his shoulder, staring blankly. Other arms seized his legs, and though he struggled and writhed with the strength of a mounting fear, he was borne to the rail. Over they went, and dropped to the rotting deck of the galley.

A numbness was creeping through him like a contagion, spreading from those crushing hands of ice. His struggles ceased. With eyes that turned stiffly in their sockets he looked for Vilma, saw her raised high above the heads of two other pallid creatures, saw them climb over the rail. Then the blackness of a dank and musty cabin enveloped him; and he was dropped with jarring force. His captors bulked black against the moonlit doorway, treading soundlessly, and were gone.

Cliff lay in rigid paralysis, every sense keenly alive, his mind striving to clutch a single spar of reason in this chaotic whirlpool of the incredible. This *couldn't* be! Soon he'd awaken to laugh at his absurd nightmare. . . . Yet it seemed horribly real. . . . It *was* real!

From the *Ariel* boiled a fearful bedlam. Screams of terror. Curses. Then other shadows loomed in the doorway, and Vilma, motionless and rigid, was dropped brutally beside him on the spongy floor.

Furiously Cliff strugged against the maddening restraint of paralysis. He couldn't lie here helpless! Vilma needed him! He'd—he'd *have* to do something. Wiht an effort that studded his forehead with rounded drops of sweat and sent the blood throbbing through the distended veins of his neck, he sought to move. And like a cord snapping, his invisible bonds fell from him.

He was crouching over Vilma, rubbing her wrists, calling to her, when again he heard the silver horn of Corio. A low droning utterly unlike the note that had awakened the galley's crew, it drifted languidly along a channel of endless sleep. It seeped through the ear-drums, touching every nerve-tip with resistless lassitude. Doggedly Cliff fought against the sound, pressing his hands over his ears, gritting his teeth, holding his eyelids wide. Yet he felt his muscles weaken, began to relax, knew dimly that his mind, sodden with drowsiness, was creeping toward the pits of slumber—and the vibrant drone ended!

His head cleared rapidly, and he bent over Vilma. As he touched a limp arm, he knew she had passed from paralysis into a deep, quiet sleep. He shook her. It was useless. He listened, heard her steady breathing; and at that instant realized that the noises from the yacht had ceased.

Rising, he strode toward the square of chalky moonlight. A foot away he halted, fell back. He had heard a faint footfall, had seen an armor-clad figure climbing over the rail! With silent haste he flung himself down beside Vilma.

And there he lay while the crew of the galley carried his friends from the *Ariel*, all slumped in that unnatural sleep, and stretched them out on the floor of the black cabin. Unmoving, he watched through narrow lids till all save Corio had been carried aboard, and the drowned things had gone back to their places in the rowers' pits. Again the hollow voice of the drum began throbbing through the silence, and the oars creaked a faint accompaniment. He could feel the galley cleaving the oily sea.

On his feet, he peered through the doorway. The backs of the rowers rose and fell with stiff, mechanical rhythm. Beyond the galley's stern came the yacht, slinking along like a thief, only one dim light showing, her Diesel engines purring almost soundlessly.

He turned and bent over Vilma, still in thrall to that strange deep slumber. As he traced the delicate outlines of her lovely face, now so lifeless and pale, bitter wrath flared within him, wrath and hatred for Leon Corio. But as he thought of the ghastly *undead* things out there in the galley pit, thought of this water-soaked anachronism which had no right to be afloat, his skin crisped with a sense of foreboding, a fear of what was yet to come. He must do something!

Stepping over the still forms of his friends, he moved to the forward wall where a beam of radiance crept fearfully through a gap between two boards. His hands touched the hull—and he jerked them away. Rotten, clammy, like a decayed corpse, partly frozen. Crouching, he peered through.

Far ahead, a blotch of evil blackness squatted on the horizon, an island crouching low like a black beast ready to spring. Around it the moonlight seemed to dim, as though it were striving to hide some nameless horror. Interminably Cliff watched while the shadowed mass drew closer . . . closer. . . .

They were headed for a towering wall of black basalt; and as the galley neared it, Cliff saw that it bore striking resemblance to a gigantic human skull, its rounded surface broken by caves that the

sea had carved into hollow eye-sockets and an empty nasal cavity. The rock wall ended high above the water; beneath it lay a gaping chasm of pitchy darkness. And the galley, drum silenced, oars at rest, slid under the ledge, into the mouth of the skull!

Just before total blackness fell, Cliff sprang to Vilma's side and raised her in his arms. If he hoped to do anything, he must do it now! He groped his way to the starboard bow and moved one hand along the dank timbers, searching. He found what he sought, a wide gap at the edge of a board. Gently lowering Vilma to the floor, he gripped the slimy wood with both hands and thrust outward mightily. A wide strip of decayed timber burst free. He dropped it into the sea and attacked the next board. In moments a wide irregular opening yawned in the galley's hull.

Leaning out, Cliff looked down. He could see nothing. Then suddenly a faint light appeared, and he heard the hum of the *Ariel's* motors as she entered the cave. The humming ceased instantly, but the faint light persisted.

Now he could see the blackness of waters, a rock wall beyond. He drew back—and as he did so, he heard movements on deck! At any moment the rowers might enter! He'd have to risk a drop into the water with Vilma—there was nothing else to do. If only she were conscious!

He stooped and raised her, holding her firmly with one arm. Gripping the hull with the other, he climbed through the opening, inhaled deeply, and dropped! A heart-stopping plunge—and cold water closed over them. Down, down—then they shot upward, reached the surface; and even as Cliff gulped a single gasping breath, something struck his skull a blinding, stunning blow! The oars!

With rapidly numbing arms and legs Cliff kicked and flailed the water, striving for land. Dimly he knew he no longer held Vilma; dimly he visioned her as were those ghastly undead; then his body scraped on something hard, and a blackness that was not physical blotted out consciousness.

2. *The Dreadful Isle*

RED-HOT hammers pounding against his temples wakened Cliff Darrell. He opened his eyes to stare into total darkness crawling with mental monsters spawned by his pain-stabbed brain. He lay half immersed in shallow brine, his head resting on a jagged stone just above the surface. Struggling to his hands and knees, he shook his head from side to side, dumbly, like an animal in pain. Something had hit him—and now he was in water—and there was no light. What had happened? Where was Vilma?

Vilma! He groaned. He remembered now. They had dropped—and his head had struck something — and — and — maybe she was floating out there even now, dead eyes staring upward.

"Vilma!" he cried, his voice pleading. "Vilma!"

Only a mocking echo answered him. There was no other sound, not even the whisper of waves swishing among the rocks.

Cliff pressed his hands fiercely against his throbbing head. The pain had become a madness, matched only by the agony of his own helplessness. He felt his reason reeling; he fought an insane desire to fling himself shrieking into that silent expanse of water to search for Vilma; then with a tremendous physical effort he jarred himself back to sanity.

He staggered to his feet, groped stumblingly over the rocks away from the water. His hand touched a rock wall broken and pitted by the action of the sea; and he crept slowly inland, feeling his way,

like a blind man. As he plodded on his thoughts blended into one fixed idea: he must get to light, must get light to search for Vilma.

Gradually the insensate pounding in his head abated, and strength returned to his body. When at last he saw light beyond a narrow fissure around an angle in the cavern, he had almost recovered. In moments he was gazing out over a plain bathed in the glow of a leprous moon. As he stared, he shivered; and it was not because of the cold draft drawing through the fissure, fanning his brine-drenched body.

Grim and starkly forbidding the plain lay before him, dead as the frozen landscape of the moon. Once there had been life there, but now only the skeletons of trees remained, lifting their wasted limbs in rigid pleading to an unresponsive sky. Some, there were, that had fallen, uprooted by the fury of passing hurricanes; these lay like the scattered bones of a dismembered giant, age-blackened, and painted with hoarfrost by the brushes of moonlight. Feebly the dead forest stirred under the touch of a moaning wind, and the gaunt shadows cast by the trees seemed to be multi-armed monsters slithering over the rocky earth.

He looked beyond the trees, and he saw light. Little squares of pale radiance cut high in the walls of an ancient black castle. Castle? Cliff frowned. He could liken it to nothing else, though he could not recall ever having seen a castle which thrust curving, needle-thin spires into the sky like a devil's horns.

Impatiently Cliff stepped from the wall of rock and glanced along a path that writhed through the forest; glanced—and crouched swiftly, a low cry escaping him. A single spot of water on a smooth, flat stone! A spot shaped like a woman's shoe! Vilma had passed this way!

But—might it not have been some other woman from the *Ariel?* No! They had been carried—and even if they had walked, their feet were dry!

Like a hound on the scent, Cliff Darrell sped along the serpentine path. The wind moaned above him, and the soughing branches seemed to whisper croaking warnings, but he ran on, his eyes constantly seeking signs of Vilma's course. Here a drop of water shaken from her drenched skirt, there another; and Cliff blessed the full moon whose light made possible his trailing of the almost invisible spoor.

Now he had passed beyond the dead forest and was moving toward the castle. The trail had been growing steadily fainter, but he managed to follow it. It led him toward a narrow stone stairway climbing crookedly to a misshapen opening in the wall. Light glowed faintly lurid somewhere deep within; and now Cliff heard a blasphemous sound belch from the depths of the castle—a wheezing, sardonic croaking like the moan of a demoniac organ, rumbling an obscene dirge. His hair bristled, and he stopped short.

He looked at the steps, searching for the fading trail—and he stiffened. There on the second step was an irregular blotch of moisture! What did it mean? Had Vilma crouched there? Had she ascended those steps? Entered?

With drawn face he began to skirt the base of the black building, searching every nook and cranny, scanning the bare walls. His heart lay like ballast in his breast. If—if something had lured Vilma into that demon-infested vault . . . he checked the thought.

Suddenly he cursed. Mechanically he had begun to measure his stride in time with the doleful dirge from the castle. He stalked on with altered pace. As he rounded the corner at the rear of the

structure, he saw a shadow outlined against the sky, crouching on a ledge below one of the little windows. He looked again—cried:

"Vilma!"

The figure above him stirred, looked down, then climbed hastily earthward. It was Vilma . . . Vilma, with black hair hanging stringily about her head, face pale, eyes fixed in the wideness of fear . . . Vilma, with her wet clothing clinging to the lovely contours of her symmetrical body.

"Oh, Cliff!" she gasped, a dry sob choking her. "Thank God—thank God!"

She clung to him, her face hidden against his shoulder, quivering uncontrollably. Then tears came, saving tears, relieving her pent-up emotions.

Cliff said nothing, only held her close, strongly protective. And gradually he felt the tempest of terror subside. At last she looked up. Some of the dread had gone from her face, and she tried to smile.

"I guess—I can't take it," she said.

Cliff shook his head solemnly. "You're a game girl, Vilma! You've nerve enough for two men. If you can, tell me what happened. Of if you'd rather let it wait, just say so."

"I'll feel better if I get it off my chest," she said. "You probably saw those—things—carry me from the yacht." Cliff nodded. "Well, I was just about paralyzed when they dropped me in their terrible boat. I remember, you tried to arouse me; then that horn blew, and I just seemed to float away in an ocean of sleep.

"After that I can remember nothing till I awoke with water filling my eyes and nose and mouth, choking me. Someone's arms were around me—it must have been you, Cliff—and then they weren't there any more, and I struggled wildly, out of my wits. I don't know how I got to shore, but I did, and I lay there in the shadow of the galley, choking and gagging, but afraid to cough. It wasn't altogether dark, and I could see those dreadful things with people hanging over their shoulders, carrying them along a narrow ledge close to the water's edge, heading inland. I thought maybe you were one of those limp bodies; and I—I almost died of fright. After a while the last one had gone, and the light went out. Then I heard another pair of feet moving over the rocks. Corio, I suppose. The sound died—and I was alone.

"That place was awful, Cliff. The blackness almost drove me mad. I wanted to scream, but I was afraid to. Some terrible weight seemed to be crushing my lungs. If I followed those undead things, they might capture me, but it seemed worse to stay there in that dreadful dark.

"I got out of there somehow, though it seemed to take hours. Then I didn't know what to do. I stood at the edge of the dead forest trying to decide; trying, too, to keep myself from shrieking and running—anywhere. Then Corio's horn blew again—a sound, Cliff, worse than anything I've ever heard. It—it was a wicked sound, promising to fulfill every foul desire that ever tainted a human mind. It repelled, yet it lured irresistibly. And—I answered!"

She stopped, and buried her face in her hands. After a moment she went on. "The sound stopped just as I found myself crawling on hands and knees up the stone stairway on the other side. Another started—that awful groaning—music—but it didn't draw me. I ran down the steps and scurried away like a rabbit trying to find a place to hide.

"After a while I came back—I thought you must be in there—and I climbed up to the window. And—and—Cliff, it's hellish!"

Her eyes, boring into his, widened in

the same rigid terror he had seen in them when he joined her.

"We could go back to the cove and get away on the *Ariel,* Vilma," Cliff said stonily. "And if you think we should, we will. But—I brought our friends here, and—well, I want to get them out if I can."

With an effort Vilma nodded. "Of course. We can't do anything else."

He released her and stepped up to the wall.

"I'm going to see what's going on in there," he said. "You wait here till I come down."

In sudden dread Vilma seized his arm. "No, Cliff. I couldn't stand waiting here alone. I'll go with you."

He nodded understandingly. And together they began climbing the precipitous wall, fitting hands and feet in step-like crevices that made progress fairly rapid. Soon they were crouching on a wide stone ledge, clinging to thin, rusted bars, staring into the black castle.

3. The Steps of Torture

A GIGANTIC hall lay before them, a single chamber whose walls were the walls of the castle, whose arched ceiling rose far above them. Directly below their window a stone platform jutted from the wall, spreading entirely across the chamber. A stone altar squatted in the center of the platform, a strangely phosphorescent fire smoldering on its top. And from the altar descended a wide, wide stairway ending in the middle of the hall. All this Cliff saw in a single sweeping glance; afterward he had eyes for nothing save the lethal horror of a mad, mad scene, revealed by the dim radiance of the altar fire.

Behind the altar stood five huge figures clad in long, hooded cloaks of scarlet. The central figure had arms raised wide, his cloak spread like the wings of some bloody bird of prey; and from his lips came a guttural incantation, a blasphemous chant in archaic Latin, in time with the wheeze of the buried organ. Now his arms dropped, and he was silent.

From the room below came a concerted whine of ceremonial devotion, a hollow, hungry wail. It rose from the bloodless lips of strangely assorted human figures ranging down the center of the long stairway in two facing columns. A hundred or more there must have been, representing half as many periods and countries, according to their strange and ancient costumes. Men in the armor of medieval Persia—the crew of the black galley; yellow-haired Vikings; hawk-faced Egyptians with leather-brown skins; half-naked islanders; red-sashed pirates from the Spanish main; men of today! And about all, like the dampness that clings to a tombstone, hovered a cloud of—death! The undead!

Cliff's gaze roved over the tensely waiting columns, then leaped to the foot of the stairs. There, cowering dumbly like sheep in a slaughter-pen, were his friends from the *Ariel.* All clothing had been stripped from them, and they stood waiting in waxen, statuesque stiffness. He saw then that three others lay prone before the stone altar, naked and ominously still.

And far down at the very end of the hall stood Leon Corio, draped in a hooded cape of unbroken black, a glint of silver in his hand—his horn of drugging sounds.

Now, as though at a silent command, a girl left the group and began to mount the stairs, as those motionless three must have mounted! Vivacious Ann—she had been the life of Cliff's yacht party; but now she was—changed. Her blanched face was rigid with inexpressible terror despite the semi-stupor which numbed her senses. Her nude body glowed like

marble in the dim light. Horribly, her feet began their climb with a little catch step suggested by the moaning chant of that cracked organ note.

She reached the first of the undead, and Cliff saw light glint on a knife-blade. A crimson gash appeared in the flesh of her thigh; and dead lips touched that wound, drank thirstily. The girl strode on, blood gleaming darkly on the white skin. A second drank of the crimson flow—a third—and the blood ceased gushing forth.

Another knife flashed—and lips closed again and again on a redly dripping wound. And the girl with the unchanging pace of a robot climbed the stairway to its very top—climbed while fiendish corpses drank her life's blood—climbed, to sink down on the altar.

One of the red-clad figures stooped over her, lifted her, buried long teeth in her throat—and Cliff saw his face. . . . His own face paled, and talons of fear raked his brain. Those others on the stairs —they were abhorrent, zombies freed from the grave. But this monster! A vampire vested with the lust and cruelty and power of hell!

He lowered her, finally, and she sank down, lay still, beside the other three.

Another began the hellish climb, a giant of a man with a thickly muscled torso. Cliff knew him instantly; and his heart seemed to stop. Leslie Starke! They'd played football together. A brave man—a fighter. He mounted the stairway with the same little catch step, the same plodding stiffness. No resistance, no struggle—only a hell of fear on his face.

The marrow melted from Cliff Darrell's bones. What—what could he do against a power that did *that* to Les Starke? He tried to swallow, but the saliva had dried on his tongue. He wanted to turn to Vilma, but he could not wrench his eyes from the frightful spectacle.

Up the stone steps Starke strode. And no blade leaped toward him; no thirsty lips closed on his flesh! In an unwavering line he mounted toward the cowled monster in the center of the dais, like a puppet on the end of a string; mounted to pause before the stone altar, to lie on it, head bent back, throat bared. . . . Mercifully Cliff regained enough control to close his eyes.

He opened them at a gasp from Vilma; saw the vampire raise the flaccid body of Les Starke and hurl it far from him, to crash to the stone steps, to roll and thud and tumble, down and down, sickeningly, to lie awkwardly twisted on the floor before his companions!

And another began to climb the long stone steps. . . .

All through the interminable night Cliff and Vilma crouched on the ledge, staring through the barred window. A hundred times they would have fled to escape the maddening scene, but they could not move. Senses reeled before the awful monotony of the ceaseless climbing, their eyes smarted with fixed staring, their tongues and throats were parched to desert dryness; yet only after hours of endless watching, only after the last victim had climbed the steps, did the edge of terror dull, and a modicum of control return to their bodies.

Stiffly Cliff looked over his shoulder. A faint tinge of gray rimmed the sea on the eastern horizon.

"Almost daylight," he whispered hoarsely.

Vilma nodded, her gaze still held by that chamber of horror. Cliff followed the direction of her eyes; and saw Corio standing like a great bat in his hooded cape close to the far wall. He raised his four-piped horn to his lips. And the instrument's fourth note crept through the room.

It was a doleful sound, a cry like the cry Death itself might possess; yet oddly—and horribly—it was soothing, promising the peace of endless sleep. And touched by its power, the columns of undead stiffened, thinned to wraiths, flowed as water flows down the stone steps, vanished!

The dead-alive—those five vampires in crimson cowls—looked upward uneasily. The shadows under the roof were graying with the light of dawn. Cliff could sense their thought. Before sunrise they must be in their tombs under the castle, to sleep until another night. With one accord they strode down the stairs, past Corio who had prostrated himself, and entered a black opening in the wall. With their departure the altar fire dimmed to a sullen ember.

Corio arose. He was alone in the chamber save for that dead, broken body lying in a twisted heap at the foot of the stairs, and those other half-alive wretches stretched out before the altar. Now, Cliff told himself, was the time for him to get up there at Corio; now was the time to rescue his friends—but he continued to crouch, unmoving.

Again Corio blew on his silver horn, and a faint cry leaped from Vilma's tensed lips. The luring note that had drawn her, Cliff thought hazily; then he thought of nothing save the sound, the sound that promised him all he could desire. Earth and its dominion, his for the taking—if he answered that call! . . . Then even the sound eluded his senses, and he heard only the promise. . . . He must answer, must claim what was rightfully his!

But those half-dead creatures—sight of their stirring steadied his staggering sanity. Here and there heads lifted and bloodless husks of bodies tried to rise. In the pallid light they seemed like corpses, freed from newly opened graves. Some could only reach their knees; others rose to uncertain limbs. And all moved down the stairway toward Corio, answering his summons; followed as he made his slow way toward the opening in the wall, still blowing the single note—the note that promised Earth and all it held. . . .

Cliff glanced toward Vilma—and she was not there. He looked down, saw her far below, dropping from crack to crevice with amazing speed and daring, hastening toward—Corio!

The thought jarred any lingering taint of allurement from Cliff's mind. He must stop her. He swung around, ignoring the cramped stiffness of his legs, and started down the steep wall. Down, down, recklessly, with Corio's horn-note only a faintly heard sound fading behind him.

Now he saw Vilma reach the rocks below and dash around the corner of the castle, and he cursed, redoubling his speed. Down—down—and suddenly the ancient rock crumbled underfoot. For an instant he hung from straining fingertips—then dropped.

A smashing impact—a stone that slid beneath him—and his head crashed against the castle wall. Through a fiery mist of pain he pictured Vilma in the grasp of Corio. The mist thickened—grew black—engulfed him.

4. *In Corio's Hands*

Cliff awoke with the sun glaring down on his face. He opened his eyes, and stabbing lances of light pierced his eyeballs. Momentarily blinded, he pressed his hands across his face and struggled erect. There was a sick feeling in his stomach, and the back of his head throbbed incessantly. He touched the aching area, and winced. A lump like an egg thrust out his scalp;

it was sticky with blood. He stood there, weaving from side to side, trying to recall something. . . .

As memory came, he groaned. Vilma! He had last seen her racing madly toward Corio, lured by his damned horn. It was daylight now; the sun had risen at least an hour ago. An hour—with Vilma gone!

Shaking his head to clear it, and gritting his teeth at the pain, he stalked along the wall. Turning the corner he strode on toward the crooked steps. The lifeless terrain reeled dizzily, but he went on resolutely. The pain in his head was fading to a dull ache; and as he mounted the steps, strength seemed to flow back into his legs. With every sense taut he passed into the gloom of the castle.

A quick glance he cast about—saw the body of Starke lying where it had fallen. No use to examine it; there was no life there. His gaze swept up the slope of the stairway to the altar at its head, lingered on the phosphorescent eye of light still glowing there. Then he shrugged grimly and moved on to the doorway in the wall. Warily he peered in

As his eyes adjusted themselves to the greater darkness, he saw a narrow stairway leading downward into a shadowy corridor. Somewhere in the tunnel's depths a faint light shone. He could see nothing more. He moved stealthily down the damp, dank stairs.

At the bottom he paused, listening. He could hear nothing. A hundred feet ahead, the corridor divided in two; a burning torch was thrust in the wall at the junction. Cliff nodded with satisfaction. Corio *must* be somewhere near by; for only a human needed light.

Silently Cliff strode along the corridor. At the fork he hesitated, then chose the right branch, for light glowed faintly along that passageway. The other led downward, black as the pits of hell.

A doorway appeared in the wall ahead, and he moved warily, with fists clenched. Flickering torchlight filtered into the corridor. There was no audible sound. Now Cliff peered into a small chamber, and gasped in sudden horror, his eyes staring unwinkingly at a spectacle incredibly pitiful.

Here were the passengers of the *Ariel*, whitely naked, and lying in little groups on the cold stone floor, huddled together for warmth. Their faces turned toward Darrell as he stood in the doorway, but there was no recognition in the vacuous eyes, no thought, no intelligence, and little life in the wide-mouthed stares. It seemed as though their souls had been drained from their bodies with their blood.

Sickened, Cliff turned away, cursing his own helplessness to aid them, cursing Leon Corio who was responsible for their plight. Black wrath gripped him as he moved on.

Again the corridor branched, and again he kept to the right. Suddenly he halted, ears straining. He heard the sound of a voice—the hollow voice of Corio! It came faintly but clearly from a room at the end of the passageway. Cliff went forward slowly.

"And so, my dear," Corio was saying, "we entered into a pact with the—Master, a pact sealed with blood. In exchange for our lives we three were to bring other humans to this island for the feasting of the dead-alive. Every third month each of us must return with our cargo when the moon is full; and since we come back on alternating months, they have a constant supply of fresh blood. Usually some of our captives live from full moon to full moon before they become like those of the galley—the undead. Some of these we waken when it

suits our fancy; they are not like the Masters; they awaken only when we call them—we three or the Masters.

"More than life they give us for what we do. Centuries ago pirates used this island for refuge. They—died—and they left their treasure in this castle. It lies in the room where the Masters lie; and we three receive payment in gold and gems. Tonight I receive my pay, and tomorrow I leave on the *Ariel*—and you go with me!"

Cliff heard Vilma answer, and even while his heart leaped with relief, he marveled at the cool scorn in her voice.

"So I go with you, do I? I'd rather climb the stairs with the rest of your victims than have anything to do with you—you monster! When Cliff Darrell finds you——"

"Darrell!" Corio's voice was a frozen sneer. "He'll do nothing! I'll find *him* —and he'll wish he could climb the stairs of blood! As for you, you'll go with me, and like it! A drop of my blood in your veins, and you will belong to the Master, as I do. We shall attend to that; but first there is something else—more pleasant." His words fell to an indistinguishable purr.

Still moving stealthily, Cliff hastened forward. Suddenly Vilma screamed; and he launched himself madly across the remaining distance, stood crouching at the threshold.

Vilma lay on an ancient bed, her wrists and ankles bound with leather thongs drawn about the four tall bed-posts. Only the torn remnants of her under-garments covered the rounded contours of her body, and Corio crouched over her, caressing the pink flesh. Vilma writhed beneath his touch.

CLIFF growled deep in his throat as he sprang. Corio spun around and leaped aside, but he was too slow to escape Cliff's powerful lunge. One hand closed on his thin neck, and the other, a rock-like fist, made a bloody ruin of his mouth. Howling with pain, Corio tried to sink his teeth in Cliff's arm.

Cliff flung him aside, following with the easy glide of a boxer. Corio crawled to his feet, cringing, dodging before the nemesis that stalked him. Again Cliff leaped, and Corio, yellow with fear, darted around the bed and ran wildly into the hallway. At the door Cliff checked himself, reason holding him. Corio could elude him with ease in this labyrinth of passages; and his first concern was Vilma's safety.

He returned to the bed. Vilma looked up at him with such relief and thankfulness on her face that Cliff, with a little choked cry, flung himself to his knees beside the bed and kissed her hungrily. For moments their lips clung; then Cliff straightened shakily, trying to laugh.

"We've got to get out of here, sweetheart," he said. "I'm not afraid of Corio, but he knows things about this place that we don't know. After you're safe on the yacht, I'll come back and get him."

He looked around for something with which to cut her bonds. On the wall above the bed were crossed a pair of murderous-looking cutlases. Seizing one of these, Cliff wrenched it from its fastenings and drew it through the cords. . . . She stood beside him, free.

"Your clothing——" Cliff began, his eyes on her almost-nude body.

She blushed and pointed mutely to a heap of rags on the floor. Her eyes flamed wrathfully. "He—he ripped them from me!"

The muscles of Cliff's jaws knotted, and he scowled as he surveyed the room for a drape or hanging to cover her. For the first time he really saw the place. All the lavish splendor of royalty had been

expended on this chamber. It might have been the bedroom of a king, except that the ancient furnishings belonged to no particular period; were, in fact, the loot of raids extended over centuries. Yet despite its splendor, everything was repulsive, cloaked with the same air of unearthly gloom that hovered about the galley.

He moved toward an intricately woven tapestry; but Vilma checked him, shuddering with revulsion.

"No, Cliff—it's too much like grave clothes. Everything about this place makes my flesh crawl. I'd rather stay as I am than touch any of it!"

Cliff nodded slowly. "Let's go then."

They hurried through the corridors toward the stairway, with Cliff holding the cutlas in readiness. As they passed the room in which lay the *Ariel's* passengers, he tried to divert Vilma's attention, but she looked in as though hypnotized.

"I saw them before," she whispered. "It's awful."

As they started up the stairway to the great hall, Cliff took the lead. He moved with utmost caution.

"It doesn't seem right," he said uneasily. "We should hear from Corio."

At that moment they did hear from him—literally. From somewhere in the maze of tunnels came the sound of his accursed horn—the note of sleep! It swirled insidiously about their heads, numbing their senses. Cliff felt his stride falter, saw Vilma stumble, and he hurled himself forward furiously, gripping her arm.

"Hurry!" he shouted, striving to pierce the fog of sleep. "We've *got* to get out! Damn him!"

Vilma rallied for an instant, and they reached the top of the stairs. On—across that wide, wide room, each step a struggle. . . . On while the droning sound floated languidly through every nerve cell. . . . On—till their muscles could no longer move, and they sagged to the hard stone, asleep.

MOMENTS later Cliff opened his eyes to meet the hellish glare of Leon Corio. Corio smiled thinly.

"So—you awaken. Good! I would have you know the fate I have planned for you. You see this?" He held the cutlas high above Darrell's throat like the blade of a guillotine. "With this I could end your life quite painlessly and quickly. It really would prove entertaining for Miss Bradley, I'm sure." He chuckled faintly behind bruised and swollen lips.

Cliff squirmed, striving to rise, then subsided instantly. He was bound hand and foot.

"I *could* kill you," Corio repeated musingly, "but that would lack finesse." His teeth bared in a feline smile. "And it would be such a waste—of blood! Instead, I'll take you out to the galley and let you lie there till her crew awakens tonight. They have tasted blood, and after tonight will taste none again for another month. I imagine they'll—drain you dry!" The last phrase was a vicious snarl.

Cliff heard Vilma utter a suppressed sob, and he turned his head. She lay close by, bound like him with strips of leather. Furiously Cliff strained at his fetters, but they held.

"And while you wait for those gentle Persians to awaken," Corio continued in tones caressingly soft, "you can think of your sweetheart in my arms! It may teach you not to strike your betters—though you can never profit by your lesson."

Stooping, he raised Cliff's powerful form and managed to fling him over one shoulder. Then he moved from the great

hall, down the stone steps, and across the dead plain with its sighing skeleton trees. He was panting jerkily by the time he came to the fissure leading to the cove, but he reached it, despite Cliff's two hundred pounds. Without pausing, he went on into the cavern, along the rock ledge, to step at last upon the deck of the black galley.

"Pleasant thoughts," he said gently as he dropped Cliff to the spongy boards. "You have only to wait till dark!"

Cliff listened to his rapid footfalls till they died in distance; then there was no sound save his own breathing.

Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the heavy gloom, and he saw that Corio had dropped him just at the edge of the rowers' pit. There were white things down there—bones, pale as marble, scattered about aimlessly. Could —could those bones join to make the rowers who would arise with the night? It seemed absurd—*was* absurd—yet he knew it was so! He had seen too much to doubt it.

He rolled over on his back and stared upward into the shadows. He must lie here helpless while Corio returned to Vilma—did with her as he pleased! Perhaps he might even transform her into a blood-tainted monster like himself! He saw her again in that room of ancient splendor, spread-eagled to the bed; and the muscles corded in his arms, and his lips strained white in a futile effort to break free.

Interminably he lay there waiting. The galley was damp with the chilling dampness of a sepulcher, and the dampness penetrated deeper and deeper. Clamping his jaws together to prevent their quivering, he struggled against a rising tide of madness which gnawed at his reason. His mind began to crunch and jangle like a machine out of gear, threatening to destroy itself.

On and on in plodding indifference the stolid moments passed, till at last Cliff realized that it was growing darker. He rolled over on his side and stared into the galley pit, eyes fixed on the inert masses of white. Soon they would move! Soon the undead would rise! His thoughts, touched by the whips of dread, sped about like slaves seeking escape from a torture pit. And abruptly out of the welter of chaotic ideas came one straw of sanity; he seized it, his heart hammering with hope.

Those Persian sailors were armed! Their swords and knives were real, for they cut flesh! Somewhere among their bones must lie sharp-edged blades!

He struggled to the edge of the pit, let his feet drop over. As they touched, he balanced precariously for an instant, then fell to his knees. He peered feverishly about among white bones, moldering garments, and rusted armor—and saw a faint glimmer of light on pointed steel. He sank forward on his face in the direction of the gleam, turned over, squirmed and writhed till he felt the cold blade against his hands. He caught it between his fingers and began sawing back and forth.

It was heart-breaking work. Age had dulled the weapon, and long slivers of rust flaked off, but the leather which bound him was also ancient. Though progress was slow, and the effort laborious, Cliff knew his bonds were weakening.

But it was growing darker. Even now he could see only a suggestion of gray among the shadows. If those undead things materialized while he lay among them! . . . Sweat stood out on his forehead and he redoubled his efforts, straining at the leather as he sawed.

With a snap the cords parted and his hands were free. A single slash severed the thongs about his ankles, and he stood

up, leaped to the deck. Not an instant too soon! There was movement in the pit—a hideous crawling of bones assembling themselves into skeletal form. . . .

Cliff waited to see no more. There were limits to what one could see and remain sane. With a bound he crossed the rotting deck, and sprang ashore. Despite the dark, he almost ran from the madness of that cave, ran till he passed through the wall of rock, till he saw the rim of the moon gleaming behind the castle.

5. The End of the Island

Out on the plain he sprinted through the ghostly forest. He knew he had no time to spare—knew that soon the march of torture would begin—knew that if Vilma were within the castle, she must answer the summons of Corio's horn. Even now light glowed faintly in the high, square windows.

That horn! At the foot of the steps he stopped short. If *he* heard the horn, he too must answer! He dared not risk it. With impatient fingers he tore a strip of cloth from his shirt, rolled it into a cylinder, and thrust it into his ear. Another for the other ear—and he darted up into the castle.

A sweeping glance revealed no one, only the murky glow of the altar fire, and the wraiths of smoke pluming upward toward the shadowed roof. Wishing now that he had brought a weapon from the galley, Cliff crossed to the opening in the wall. He stood at the top of the steps, listening, then cursed silently as he remembered that he could hear none but very loud sounds. He saw nothing; so he hastened down into the corridor. His steps were swiftly stealthy as he moved toward Corio's room.

He was past the first branching passage, when a sixth sense warned him of someone's approach. He ran swiftly to the next fork, then paused within its shelter and glanced back, saw five red-cowled figures glide along the tunnel and vanish up the stairway. Cliff frowned. With the vampires in the great hall, Corio must soon follow, leading his victims to the blood-feast. He drew back deeper into the shadows.

His groping hands touched something in the dark—round and hard—like a keg. Curiously he investigated. It *was* a keg, and there were others. A sandy powder trailed to the floor from a crack in one of them. Thoughtfully Cliff let it run through his fingers. Gunpowder! Of course—he had heard Corio mention pirates and their treasure, and this had been their cache of explosive. An idea was forming. . . .

He looked up to see a shadow pass the mouth of the tunnel; he crept forward and peered out. He saw the black-hooded figure of Leon Corio striding along, saw him enter the room where the passengers of the *Ariel* lay. In a breath Cliff was down the corridor to Corio's room. A tarnished silver candelabrum shed faint light through the chamber, and by its flickering glow he searched for Vilma, thoroughly, painstakingly—futilely.

He stood in the center of the room in indecision, his forehead creased with anxiety. If only he could find her, he'd know how to plan! He ran his hand through his hair helplessly, then heard very faintly the luring note of Corio's horn. She must answer that summons, unless Corio had her tied somewhere. His best chance of finding her lay in the hall above.

On the wall still hung the mate of the cutlas he had used to free Vilma; he wrenched it down and ran out into the corridor. The last of the naked marchers was disappearing up the stairway. Now

the horn-note died, and he could feel more than hear the rumbling bass of the dirge from the depths below him.

He ran the rest of the distance along the passageway and mounted the steps two at a stride. He looked into the torture hall. As on the previous night, Corio stood far back, close to the wall in which Cliff crouched. The arms of the Master were raised high; raised, Cliff knew though he could not hear it, in a blasphemous incantation. And then he saw something that sent a crimson lance of fury crashing through his brain.

Vilma, stripped like the rest, stood with the other victims at the foot of the long steps! Her body gleamed pinkly, in contrast to the pallid drabness of the half-dead automatons, and she held her head proudly erect. But from where he stood Cliff could see the side of her face, and it bore a look of terror.

He could see Corio's face, too, and he was looking at the girl, baffled fury glaring from his eyes—as though she were there against his will.

Cliff's first impulse was to fling himself out there with his cutlas and hack a way to freedom for Vilma and himself, but cold reason checked this folly. Such a course could end only in death. Motionless he watched the scene before him, his brain frantically seeking a plan with even a ghost of a chance of succeeding.

The gunpowder! There was enough of the stuff below to blast this entire castle into the hell where it belonged! Hastily he retraced his steps to the tunnel in which he had found the kegs, plucking the torch from its niche in the wall as he passed it. He held it high above his head as he examined the contents of the broken keg. Unmistakably gunpowder!

Thrusting the cutlas beneath his belt, he clutched a handful of the black dust. Then, crouching close to the floor, he drew an irregular thread through the passageway toward the stairs. Once he returned for more powder, but in a few minutes the job was done. At the foot of the steps where the trail ended, he touched his torch to the black line and watched a hissing spark snake its white-smoked way back toward the powder kegs. An instant he watched it, then sprang up the stairs. He'd have to move fast!

With a hideous howl he darted into the hall, his cutlas above his head. Corio spun about—and it was his last living act. A single sweep of the great blade sheared his head from his neck, sent it rolling grotesquely along the floor. For three heart-beats the body stood with a fountain of blood spurting from severed arteries; then it crashed.

Coolly Cliff leaned over the twitching cadaver, ignoring the bedlam on the stairs, the horde sweeping down toward him, hurling aside the waiting humans. He pried open clutching fingers, seized a twisted silver instrument, and raised it to his lips.

The mass of undead were almost upon him, the murky light glinting on menacing blades, when Cliff blew the first note. The note of sleep! He tried again, hastily. And it was the right one!

At the doleful, soothing sound the undead halted in their tracks; halted—and melted into nothingness before his eyes!

But now those other five in their robes of bloody red—they were charging, and even though they were unarmed, Cliff felt a stab of fear. They possessed powers beyond the human, powers a mortal could not combat. He braced himself and waited.

At the bottom of the steps they stopped, ranging in a wide half-circle. The central monster—the Master—flung up his arms in a strangely terrifying gesture, and Cliff saw his carmine lips move

in a chant which he could not hear. Something, a chilling Presence, hovered about him, seemed to settle upon him, cloaking him with the might of the devil himself. That unheard incantation continued, and Cliff felt a cold rigidity creeping through every fiber, slowly freezing his limbs into columns of ice.

With a mighty effort of will he flung himself toward that accursed drinker of blood—and at that instant a terrific detonation rocked the ancient building, and a cloud of smoke and flame burst from the opening in the wall. Cliff was hurled from his feet, rolled over and over, and crashed against the wall by the awful concussion, the cutlas and silver horn sent whirling through the air.

Dizzily he staggered to his feet, crouching defensively. Sounds came to him clearly now; the explosion must have jarred the plugs from his ears. He scanned the room; saw the unclad humans scattered everywhere, most of them lying still and unconscious. He saw Vilma rising slowly; then he looked for the monsters in red. Startled, he saw them rushing toward the opening in the wall, to vanish in its smoke-filled interior. Why did they——? Then he knew. Down there somewhere were their graves—graves rent and broken by the explosion—graves threatened by the flames—and panic had seized the vampires, fear of the death which would result with exile from their tombs!

Unsteadily Cliff crossed to Vilma. She saw him coming and flung herself sobbing into his arms. He crushed her lithe form close—and another explosion, more violent than the first, sent a section of the stone floor leaping upward as though with life of its own. Clinging to Vilma, Cliff managed to maintain his footing, though the floor bucked and heaved. A snapping, booming roar—and a great chasm opened in the floor. A breathless instant—and a segment of the stone stairs, rumbling thunderously, dropped out of sight into a newly formed pit! With it went the blasphemous altar and its phosphorescent fire.

Deafened, stunned, momentarily powerless to move, Cliff's mind groped for an explanation. It seemed incredible that gunpowder could cause such havoc. And the swaying of the floor continued; the thick stone walls shook alarmingly. Suddenly he understood. An earthquake! The explosions had jarred the none-too-stable understrata of rock into spasmodic motion that must grind everything to bits! The island was doomed! And Earth would be better without it.

If only they could reach the *Ariel* first!

New strength flowed through him, and hugging Vilma close, he staggered toward the spot where he knew the door must be. Somehow he reached it, and reeled down the broken stone steps.

The plain of dead trees swayed like the deck of a ship in a storm as Cliff started across it. A gale had arisen and swept in from the sea, ripping dry branches from the skeleton growths and whirling them about like straws. Yet somehow Cliff reached the crevice in the rock wall with his burden, reached the deck of the galley, crossed it, and won to the safety of the *Ariel*. Minutes later, with Diesel engines purring, they crept out through the narrow channel into the open sea.

TEN minutes later the Isle of the Undead lay safely behind them. Vilma had dressed; and now they sat together in the pilot house. Cliff had one arm about her, and one hand on the wheel.

"And so," the girl was saying, "while Corio carried you to that terrible old boat, I got loose. He hadn't tied me very tightly, and I slipped my hands

free. I had to hide, and I could think of only one place that might be safe, where he wouldn't think to look for me. I ran down to the room where those—those others lay; I undressed, and buried myself among them. It was horrible—the way they sucked each other's wounds. . . ."

Cliff pressed a hand across her lips. "Forget that!" he said almost fiercely. "Forget all of it—d'you hear?"

She looked up at him and said simply: "I'll try."

They glanced back toward the black blotch on the horizon. The seismic disturbances continued unabated. At that moment they saw the barrier of rock like a skull split and sink into the sea. Beyond, cleansing tongues of flame licked the sky. They saw a single jagged wall of the castle still standing, one window glowing in its black expanse like a square, bloody moon against a bloody sky. It crumbled.

They turned away, and Cliff's arm circled the girl he loved. Their lips met and clung. . . . And the *Ariel* plowed on through the frothing brine, bearing them toward safety and forgetfulness. . . . Together.

The Lost Temples of Xantoos

By HOWELL CALHOUN

Celestial fantasies of deathless night,
  Enraptured colonnades adorned with pearls,
Resplendent guardians of crimson light,
  Expanse of darkness silently unfurls
Among colossal ruins on this shore,
  That once was purled by Xantoos' rolling seas;
Nothing remains upon this barren core
  Of Mars, but your palatial memories.

Your altars and magnificent black gods
  Still flash beneath the sapphire torches' flames,
The fragrant ring of sacred flowers nods
  Beneath the monstrous idols' gilded frames.
Your jeweled gates swing open on their bands
Of gold; within, a lurid shadow stands.

"Even as he gazed, the whole face was twisting into a sudden ghastly life."

The Opener of the Way

By ROBERT BLOCH

A tremendous tale about the dread doom that overtook an archeologist in that forgotten tomb beneath the desert sands of Egypt

THE statue of Anubis brooded over the darkness. Its blind eyes had basked in the blackness for unnumbered centuries, and the dust of ages had settled upon its stony brow. The damp air of the pit had caused its canine features to crumble, but the stone lips of the image still were curled in a snarling grin of cryptic mirth. It was almost as if the idol were alive; as if it had seen the shadowed centuries slip by, and with them the glory of Egypt and the old gods. Then indeed would it have reason to grin, at the thought of

ancient pomps and vain and vanished splendor. But the statue of Anubis, Opener of the Way, jackal-headed god of Karneter, was not alive, and those that had bowed in worship were long dead. Death was everywhere; it haunted the shadowy tunnel where the idol stood, hidden away in the mummy-cases and biding amidst the very dust of the stone floor. Death, and darkness—darkness undispelled by light these three thousand years.

Today, however, light came. It was heralded by a grating clang, as the iron door at the further end of the passageway swung open on its rusted hinges; swung open for the first time in thirty centuries. Through the opening came the strange illumination of a torch, and the sudden sound of voices.

There was something indescribably eery about the event. For three thousand years no light had shone in these black and buried vaults; for three thousand years no feet had disturbed the dusty carpet of their floors; for three thousand years no voice had sent its sound through the ancient air. The last light had come from a sacred torch in the hand of a priest of Bast; the last feet to violate the dust had been encased in Egyptian sandals; the last voice had spoken a prayer in the language of the Upper Nile.

And now, an electric torch flooded the scene with sudden light; booted feet stamped noisily across the floor, and an English voice gave vent to fervent profanity.

In the torchlight the bearer of the illumination was revealed. He was a tall, thin man, with a face as wrinkled as the papyrus parchment he clutched nervously in his left hand. His white hair, sunken eyes and yellowed skin gave him the aspect of an old man, but the smile upon his thin lips was full of the triumph of youth. Close behind him crowded another, a younger replica of the first. It was he who had sworn.

"For the love of God, father—we've made it!"

"Yes, my boy, so we have."

"Look! There's the statue, just as the map showed it!"

The two men stepped softly in the dust-strewn passage and halted directly in front of the idol. Sir Ronald Barton, the bearer of the light, held it aloft to inspect the figure of the god more closely. Peter Barton stood at his side, eyes following his father's gaze.

For a long moment the invaders scrutinized the guardian of the tomb they had violated. It was a strange moment there in the underground burrow, a moment that spanned eternity as the old confronted the new.

If the idol had been given the gift of sight it might have contrasted these white-skinned, smartly-accoutered intruders with the masked and dusky priests of olden days. But Anubis could not see; the god merely grinned in chimeric glee, with stone teeth bared in a centuried smile.

But the two men gazed up at the eidolon in astonishment and awe. The colossal figure of the jackal-god dominated the dim passage, and its weathered form still held vestiges of imposing grandeur and inexplicable menace. The sudden influx of outer air from the opened door had swept the idol's body free of dust, and the intruders scrutinized its gleaming form with a certain vague unease. Twelve feet tall was Anubis, a man-like figure with the dog-face of a jackal upon massive shoulders. The arms of the statue were held forth in an attitude of warning, as if endeavoring to repel the passage of outsiders. This was peculiar, for to all intents and purposes the guardian figure had nothing behind it but a narrow niche in the wall.

There was an air of evil suggestion about the god, however; a hint of bestial humanity in its body which seemed to hide a secret, sentient life. The knowing smile on the carven countenance seemed cynically alive; the eyes, though stony, held a strange and disturbing *awareness*. It was as though the statue were alive; or, rather, as though it were merely a stone cloak that harbored life.

The two explorers sensed this without speaking, and for a long minute they contemplated the Opener of the Way uneasily. Then, with a sudden start, the older man resumed his customary briskness of manner.

"Well, son, let's not stand here gawking at this thing all day! We have plenty to do yet—the biggest task remains. Have you looked at the map?"

"Yes, father." The younger man's voice was not nearly as loud or as firm as Sir Ronald's. He did not like the mephitic air of the stone passageway; he did not care for the stench that seemed to spawn in the shadows of the corners. He was acutely aware of the fact that he and his father were in a hidden tomb, seven hundred feet below the desert sands; a secret tomb that had lain unopened for thirty creeping centuries. And he could not help but remember the curse.

For there was a curse on the place; indeed, it was that which had led to its discovery.

Sir Ronald had found it in the excavation of the Ninth Pyramid, the moldering papyrus parchment which held the key to a secret way. How he had smuggled it past the heads of the expedition nobody can say, but he had managed the task somehow.

After all, he was not wholly to be blamed, though the theft of expeditionary trophies is a serious offense. But for twenty years Sir Ronald Barton had combed the deserts, uncovered sacred relics, deciphered hieroglyphics, and disinterred mummies, statues, ancient furniture, or precious stones. He had unearthed untold wealth and incredibly valuable manuscripts for his Government; yet he was still a poor man, and had never been rewarded by becoming head of an expedition of his own. Who can blame him if he took that one misstep which he knew would lead him to fame and fortune at last?

Besides, he was getting old, and after a score of years in Egypt all archeologists are a little mad. There is something about the sullen sun overhead that paralyzes the brains of men as they ferret in the sand, digging in unhallowed ruins; something about the damp, dark stillness underground in temple vaults that chills the soul. It is not good to look upon the old gods in the places where they still rule; for cat-headed Bubastis, serpented Set, and evil Amon-Ra frown down as sullen guardians in the purple pylons before the pyramids. Over all is an air of forbidden things long dead, and it creeps into the blood. Sir Ronald had dabbled in sorcery, a bit; so perhaps it affected him more strongly than the rest. At any rate, he stole the parchment.

It had been penned by a priest of ancient Egypt, but the priest had not been a holy man. No man could write as he had written without violating his vows. It was a dreadful thing, that manuscript, steeped in sorcery and hideous with half-hinted horrors.

The enchanter who had written it alluded to gods far older than those he worshipped. There was mention of the "Demon Messenger" and the "Black Temple," coupled with the secret myth and legend-cycles of pre-Adamite days. For just as the Christian religion has its

Black Mass, just as every sect has its hidden Devil-worship, the Egyptians knew their own darker gods.

The names of these accursed ones were set forth, together with the orisons necessary for their invocation. Shocking and blasphemous statements abounded in the text; threats against the reigning religion, and terrible curses upon the people who upheld it. Perhaps that is why Sir Ronald found it buried with the mummy of the priest—its discoverers had not dared to destroy it, because of the doom which might befall them. They had their way of vengeance, though; because the mummy of the priest was found without arms, legs, or eyes, and these were not lost through decay.

SIR RONALD, though he found the above-mentioned portions of the parchment intensely interesting, was much more impressed by the last page. It was here that the sacrilegious one told of the tomb of his master, who ruled the dark cult of the day. There were a map, a chart, and certain directions. These had not been written in Egyptian, but in the cuneiform chirography of Chaldea. Doubtless that is why the old avenging priests had not sought out the spot for themselves to destroy it. They were probably unfamiliar with the language; unless they were kept away by fear of the curse.

Peter Barton still remembered that night in Cairo when he and his father had first read it in translation. He recalled the avid gleam in Sir Ronald's glittering eyes, the tremulous depth in his guttural voice.

"And as the maps direct, there you shall find the tomb of the Master, who lies with his acolytes and all his treasure."

Sir Ronald's voice nearly broke with excitement as he pronounced this last word.

"And at the entrance upon the night that the Dog-Star is ascendant you must give up three jackals upon an altar in sacrifice, and with the blood bestrew the sands about the opening. Then the bats shall descend, that they may have feasting, and carry their glad tidings of blood to Father Set in the Underworld."

"Superstitious rigmarole!" young Peter had exclaimed.

"Don't scoff, son," Sir Ronald advised. "I could give you reasons for what it says above, and make you understand. But I am afraid that the truth would disturb you unnecessarily."

Peter had stayed silent while his father read on:

"Upon descending into the outer passage you will find the door, set with the symbol of the Master who waits within. Grasp the symbol by the seventh tongue in the seventh head, and with a knife remove it. Then shall the barrier give way, and the gate to the tomb be yours. Thirty and three are the steps along the inner passage, and there stands the statue of Anubis, Opener of the Way."

"Anubis! But isn't he a regular Egyptian deity—a recognized one?" Peter broke in.

His father answered from the manuscript itself:

"For Lord Anubis holds the keys to Life and Death; he guards cryptic Karneter, and none shall pass the Veil without consent. Some there are who deem the Jackal-god to be a friend of those who rule, but he is not. Anubis stands in shadows, for he is the Keeper of Mysteries. In olden days for which there is no number it is written that Lord Anubis revealed himself to men, and he who then was Master fashioned the first image of the god in his true likeness. Such is the image that you will find at the end of the inner passageway—the

first true image of the Opener of the Way."

"Astounding!" Peter had muttered. "Think what it means if this is true; imagine finding the original statue of the god!"

His father merely smiled, a trifle wanly, Peter thought.

"There are ways in which the first image differs from the rest," said the manuscript. "These ways are not good for men to know; so the first likeness was hidden by the Masters through the ages, and worshipped according to its demands. But now that our enemies—may their souls and vitals rot!—have dared profane the rites, the Master saw fit to hide the image and bury it with him when he died."

Sir Ronald's voice quivered as he read the next few lines:

"But Anubis does not stand at the head of the inner passage for this reason alone. He is truly called the Opener of the Way, and without his help none may pass to the tomb within."

Here the older man stopped completely for a long moment.

"What's the matter?" inquired Peter, impatiently. "I suppose there's another silly ritual involving the statue of the god, eh?"

His father did not answer, but read on to himself, silently. Peter noticed that Sir Ronald's hands trembled as he held the parchment, and when the older man looked up at last his face was very pale.

"Yes, my boy," he replied, huskily. "That's what it is—another silly ritual. But no need to bother about it until we get to the place itself."

"You mean to go there—discover the spot?" asked the young man, eagerly.

"I must go there." Sir Ronald's tone was constrained. He glanced again at the last portion of the parchment:

"But beware, for those who do not believe shall die. Pass Lord Anubis though they may, still he shall know and not permit of their return unto the world of men. For the eidolon of Anubis is a very strange one indeed, and holds a secret soul."

The old archeologist blurted out these last words very quickly, and immediately folded up the parchment again. After that he had deliberately turned the talk to practical affairs, as if seeking to forget what he had read.

THE next weeks were spent in preparation for the trip to the south, and Sir Ronald seemed to avoid his son, except when it was necessary to converse with him on matters pertaining directly to the expeditionary affairs.

But Peter had not forgotten. He wondered what it was his father had read silently; that secret ritual which would enable one to pass beyond the Opener of the Way. Why had his father blanched and trembled, then quickly changed the subject to saner things? Why had he guarded the parchment so closely? And just what was the nature of the "curse" the manuscript mentioned at the last?

Peter pondered these questions a great deal, but he had gradually dispelled his stronger fears, because of the necessary preoccupation with technical details which the organizing of their expedition subsequently entailed. Not until he and his father were actually in the desert did his misgivings return, but then they plagued him mightily.

There is an air of eon-spawned antiquity about the desert, a certain aura of the ancient which makes one feel that the trivial triumphs of man are as fleeting and quickly obscured as his footprints in the shifting sand. In such places there descends upon the soul a sphinx-like brooding, and somber solilo-

quies rise, unrepressed, to rule the mind.

Young Peter had been affected by the spell of the silent sands. He tried to remember some of the things his father had once told him concerning Egyptian sorcery, and the miraculous magic of the high priests. Legends of tombs and underground horrors took on a new reality here in the place of their birth. Peter Barton knew personally many men who had believed in the potency of curses, and some of them had died strangely. There was the Tut-Ankh-Ahmen affair, and the Paut temple scandal, and the terrible rumors concerning the end of that unsavory adventurer, Doctor Stugatche. At night, under the spying stars, he would recall these and similar tales, then shudder anew at the thought of what might lie before him.

When Sir Ronald had made camp at the spot designated by the map, there had been new and more concrete terrors.

That first night, Sir Ronald had gone off alone into the hills behind the tents. He bore with him a white goat, and a sharp knife. His son, following, had come upon the old man after a deed had been done, so that the sand had been given to drink. The goat's blood shone horribly in the moonlight, and there was a red glare of corresponding violence in the slayer's eyes. Peter had not made his presence known, for he did not deem it wise to interrupt his father while the old man was muttering those outlandish Egyptian phrases to a mocking moon.

Indeed, Peter was more than a little afraid of Sir Ronald, else he would have attempted to dissuade him from continuing the expedition. But there was something in Sir Ronald's manner which hinted at a mad, unthwartable determination. It was that which made Peter keep silent; that which held him from bluntly asking his father the true details about the parchment's mysterious "curse."

The day after the peculiar incident in the midnight hills, Sir Ronald, after consulting certain zodiacal charts, announced that the digging would start. Carefully, eyes on the map, he measured his paces to an exact spot in the sands, and ordered the men to work. By sundown a ten-foot shaft yawned like a great wound in the earth, and excited natives proclaimed the presence of a door beneath.

Sir Ronald rewarded them with spirits sufficient to plunge them all into a comatose slumber long before midnight; then he opened the crates where the jackals were kept. Peter assisted him in this task, but reluctantly.

For Peter, remembering the instructions in the parchment, knew why his father had taken the three beasts along; knew why he had withheld digging until a night when Canis was ascendant; realized, too, that the stuporous sleep of the men was by no means accidental. The manuscript specified that the blood of three jackals should be spilled in accordance with the old rites of propitiation. So Sir Ronald took the creatures over to a spot among the stones before the excavation, and Peter watched silently from afar.

He saw a gleaming blade rise and descend thrice in the mad moonlight; heard three keening cries well out in the desert air; and the wind bore its scented baptism of blood. Then, with uncanny swiftness, there came a rustling from above, and the moon was blotted out by a brood of bats. Their beating wings coursed cloud-like over its phosphorescent face, and with eager squeakings the charnel swarm descended to batten on the bloody bodies of the beasts.

That terrible scurrying and tittering,

coupled with a gust of ghoulish stench, made Peter reel with uncontrollable nausea. He had turned hastily away, but not before his eyes were assailed by the sight of Sir Ronald Barton crouching obscenely over the jackals, his face and body nearly obscured by a swarm of circling bats. On his face there was a hideous smile, and with his knife he was digging chunks of raw flesh from the carcasses beneath him—chunks of raw flesh which he held in outstretched hands, feeding the scavenger bats as they flew. And when he bent and nuzzled at one of the bodies with his own teeth, Peter ran sobbing to his tent, only to spend the rest of the night in torment-torpid dreams. The next morning he noticed that his father's lips were unnaturally red. . . .

2

THAT day they had descended to the outer door. Neither Peter nor his father spoke of what had occurred the previous night, and the men ascribed their sleep to the spirits alone. Evidently Sir Ronald had disposed of the fleshy remnants and bones of his victims before retiring; for there was now nought visible around the stones of the opening. And the terrible clinging odor of decay might very well be ascribed to the noisome emanations of the pit below.

By this time Peter, whose nerves were near the breaking-point, was too much afraid of his father to demur when ordered to descend to the floor of the excavation. Undoubtedly the elder man was in the grip of a severe aberration, but Peter, who really loved his father, thought it advisable not to provoke him by refusing to obey. He did not like the idea of going down into that chasm, for the seeping smell was distressingly repulsive. But the stench below was a thousand times more bearable than the sight of the dark door through which it had slithered.

This evidently was the door to the outer passageway that the manuscript had mentioned. All at once Peter knew what was meant by the allusion to the "seventh tongue in the seventh head," and wished that the meaning had remained for ever obscured from his brain. For the door was set with a silver symbol, framed in the familiar ideography of Egyptological lore. This central symbol consisted of the heads of the seven principal Egyptian gods—Osiris, Isis, Ra, Bast, Thoth, Set, and Anubis. But the horror lay in the fact that all seven heads protruded from a common body, and it was not the body of any god heretofore known in myth. It was not anthropomorphic, that figure; it held nothing that aped the human form. And Peter could recall no parallel in all the Egyptian cosmology or pantheon which could be remotely construed to resemble this utterly alien horror.

The quixotic abhorrency it induced cannot be ascribed to anything which may be put into words. The sight of it seemed to send little tentacles of terror through Peter's eyes; tiny tentacles that took root in his brain, to drain it dry of all feeling save frantic fear. Part of this may have been due to the fact that the body appeared to be constantly changing; *melting*, that is, from one indescribable shape to another. When viewed from a certain angle the form was that of a Medusa-like mass of serpents; a second gaze revealed that the thing was a glistening array of vampiric flowers, with gelid, protoplasmic petals that seemed to weave in blob-like thirst for blood. A third scrutiny made it appear that the formless mass was nothing but a chaotic jumble of silver skulls. At another time it seemed to hold a certain hidden pattern of the cosmos—stars and planets so com-

pressed as to hint at the enormity of all space beyond.

What devilish craft could produce such a baffling nightmare composite Peter could not say, and he did not like to imagine that the insane thing was the pattern of any human artist. He fancied that there was some sinister implication of allegorical significance about the door, that the heads, set on the background of that baffling body, were somehow symbolic of a secret horror which rules behind all human gods. But the more he looked, the more his mind became absorbed in the intricate silvery maze of design. It was compelling, hypnotic; glimpsing it was like pondering upon the meaning of Life—pondering in that awful way that drives philosophers mad.

From this beguilement, Peter was roughly awakened by his father's voice. He had been very curt and abrupt all morning, but now his words were fraught with an unmistakable eagerness.

"It's the place all right—the door of the parchment! Now I know what Prinn must have meant in his chapter on the Saracenic rituals; the part where he spoke of the 'symbols on the gate'. We must photograph this after we finish. I hope we can move it later, if the natives don't object."

There was a hidden relish in his words which Peter disliked, and almost feared. He became suddenly aware of how little he really knew about his father and his secret studies of recent years; recalled reluctantly certain guarded tomes he had glimpsed in the library at Cairo. And last night, his father had been out there with the bats, like some mad old priest. Did he really believe such nonsense? *Or did he know it was the truth?*

"Now!" The old man's voice was triumphant. "I have the knife. Stand back."

With fearful, fascinated eyes, Peter saw his father insert the tip of the knife under the seventh head—that of Anubis. Steel grated on silver; then the latter gave. As the dog-like head slowly turned as though actuated by a hidden pivot, the door swung open with a brazen clangor that echoed and re-echoed through the musty depths beyond.

And musty those depths proved to be. A noxious acrid scent burst forth from its long imprisonment, a charnel fetor. It was not the *natron* or spice-laden miasma common to most tombs; rather it held the concentrated essence of death itself—mildewed bones, putrefied flesh, and crumbled dust.

ONCE the first strength of the gaseous vapor had abated, Sir Ronald immediately stepped inside. He was followed, though much less quickly, by his son. The thirty-and-three sloping steps along the corridor were traversed, as the manuscript had foretold. Then, lantern in hand, the old man was confronted by the enigmatic eidolon of Anubis.

After that first dismaying scrutiny, during which Peter had uneasily recalled these memories of preceding incidents, Sir Ronald interrupted his son's revery and spoke. He whispered there, before the giant statue of the god that seemed to frown down upon the puniness of men with baleful, conscious eyes. Some trick of the lantern-light seemed to change the contours of that stone countenance; its chiseled grin was transformed into a gloating leer of mirthless menace. Yet the grim apprehension this aroused in Peter was soon overpowered by more acute fright when he heard his father's words.

"Listen, boy. I did not tell you all that the parchment revealed to me that night. You remember, there was a part I read only to myself. Well, I had reasons for not letting you know the rest

then; you would not have understood, and probably would have refused to come here with me. I needed you too much to risk that.

"You don't know what this moment means to me, my son. For years I've worked and studied in secret over things which others scoff at as superstitious fancies. I believed, however, and I have learned. There are always lurking truths behind every forgotten religion; distorted facts which can be rationalized into new concepts of reality. I've been on the trail of something like this for a long time—I knew that if I could discover a tomb like this it must surely contain proofs which would convince the world. There are probably mummies within; the bodies of this cult's secret leaders. That's not what I'm after, though. It's the knowledge that's buried with them; the papyrus manuscripts that hold forbidden secrets—wisdom the world has never known! Wisdom—and power!"

Sir Ronald's voice was shrill with unnatural excitement.

"Power! I have read about the inner circles of the Black Temple, and the cult that was ruled by those designated as Masters in this parchment. They were not ordinary priests of magic; they had traffickings with entities from outside human spheres. Their curses were feared, and their wishes respected. Why? Because of what they knew. I tell you, in this tomb we may find secrets that can give us mastery over half the world! Death-rays, and insidious poisons, old books and potent spells whose efficacy may bring a renascence of primal gods again. Think of it! One could control governments, rule kingdoms, destroy enemies with that knowledge! And there will be jewels, wealth and riches undreamt of, the treasure of a thousand thrones!"

He is quite mad, Peter thought. For a moment he entertained a frantic impulse to turn and run back through the corridor; he wanted to see the sanity of a sun overhead, and feel a breath of air on his brow that was not dust-polluted by dead centuries. But the old man grasped him by the shoulders as he mumbled on, and Peter was forced to remain.

"You don't understand, I see. Perhaps it's for the best; but no matter, I know what I'm about. You will, too, after I do what is necessary. I must tell you now what the parchment said; that portion of it which I did not read aloud."

Some inner instinct screamed silent warnings in Peter's brain. He must get away—he must! But his father's grip was firm, though his voice trembled.

"The part I refer to is that which tells one how to get past this statue and into the tomb itself. No, nothing can be discovered by looking at the thing; there's no secret passage behind it; no levers concealed in the body of the god. The Master and his acolytes were cleverer than that. Mechanical means are of no avail—there's only one way to enter into the tomb beyond, and that is *through the body of the god itself!*"

Peter gazed again into the mask-like countenance of Anubis. The jackal-face was contorted in cunning comprehension—or was it only a trick of the light? His father hurried on.

"That sounds queer, but it's the truth. You remember what the parchment said about this statue being the first one—different from the rest? How it emphasized the fact that Anubis is the *Opener of the Way*, and hinted at its *secret soul?* Well, the next lines explained that. It seems that the figure can turn upon a pivot and open a space behind it into the tomb, *but only when the idol is animated by a human consciousness.*"

They were all mad, Peter knew. He,

his father, the old priests, and the statue itself; all insane entities in a world of chaos.

"That means only one thing. I must hypnotize myself by gazing at the god; hypnotize myself until my soul enters its body and opens the way beyond."

Peter's blood was frozen ice in his veins.

"It's not so bizarre a conception at that. The *yogis* believe that in their trances they incarnate themselves with the godhead; the self-hypnotic state is a religious manifestation among all races. And mesmerism is a scientific truth; a truth known and practised thousands of years before psychology was postulated as an organized study. These priests evidently knew the principle. So that is what I must do—hypnotize myself so that my soul or consciousness enters the image. Then I shall be able to open the tomb behind."

"But the curse!" Peter muttered, finding his voice at last. "You know what it says about a curse on unbelievers—something about Lord Anubis being a guardian as well as an Opener of the Way. What about that?"

"Sheer humbug!" Sir Ronald's tone was fanatically firm. "That was merely inserted to frighten off tomb-looters. At any rate, I must risk it. All you need do is wait. Once I pass into a trance, the statue will move, and the passage beyond will be disclosed. Enter it, immediately. Then give my body a good shake to break the coma, and I'll be all right again."

THERE was in his father's words an authority which could not be denied. So Peter held the lantern aloft and allowed its beams to play over the face of Anubis. He stood in silence while his father focussed his gaze upon the jackal eyes—those stony, staring eyes that had so disturbed them with hints of a secret life.

It was a terrible tableau; the two men, the twelve-foot god, confronting each other in a black vault beneath the earth.

Sir Ronald's lips moved in fragments of ancient Egyptian prayers. His eyes were fixed upon a nimbus of light that had settled about the canine forehead. Gradually his stare became glassy; nictation ceased, and the pupils glowed with a peculiar nyctaloptic fire. The man's body sagged visibly, as if it were being vampirically drained of all life.

Then, to Peter's horror, a pallor overspread his father's face, and he sank down silently upon the stone floor. But his eyes never left those of the idol. Peter's left arm, which held the lantern aloft, was seized with a spasmodic convulsion of utter fright. Minutes sped away in silence. Time has no meaning in a place of death.

Peter could not think. He had seen his father practise self-hypnosis before, with mirrors and lights; he knew it was perfectly harmless in the hands of a skilled adept. But this was different. Could he enter the body of an Egyptian god? And if he did—what of the curse? These two questions reverberated like tiny voices somewhere in his being, but they were engulfed by overpowering fear.

This fear rose to a mad crescendo as Peter saw the change occur. All at once his father's eyes flickered like dying fires, and consciousness went out. But the eyes of the god—*the eyes of Anubis were no longer stone!*

The cyclopean statue was alive!

His father had been right. He had done it—hypnotized his consciousness into the body of the idol. Peter gasped, as a sudden thought slithered into his brain. If his father's theory had been correct so far, then what about the rest?

He had said that once inside the figure, his soul would direct it to open the way. But nothing was happening. *What was wrong?*

In panic, Peter bent down and examined the body of his father. It was limp, cold, and lifeless. Sir Ronald was dead!

Unbidden, Peter remembered the parchment's cryptic warnings:

"Those who do not believe shall die. Pass Lord Anubis though they may, still he shall know and not permit of their return unto the world of men. For the eidolon of Anubis is strange indeed, and holds a secret soul."

A secret soul! Peter, terror throbbing in his temples, raised the lantern aloft and looked once more into the god's face. Again he saw that the stony, snarling mask of Anubis held living eyes!

They glittered bestially, knowingly, evilly. And Peter, seeing them, went berserk. He did not—could not—think; all he knew was that his father was dead, and this statue had somehow killed him and come alive.

So Peter Barton suddenly rushed forward, screaming hoarsely, and began to beat upon the stone idol with futile fists. His bleeding, lacerated knuckles clawed at the cold legs, but Anubis did not stir. Yet his eyes still held their awful life.

The man cursed in sheer delirium, babbling in a tortured voice as he started to climb up to that mocking face. He must know what lay behind that gaze, see the thing and destroy its unnatural life. As he climbed, he sobbed his father's name in agony.

How long it took him to reach the top he never knew; the last minutes were merely a red blur of nightmare frenzy. When he recovered his senses he was clinging precariously to the statue's neck, his feet braced on the belly of the image. And he was still staring into those dreadful living eyes.

But even as he gazed, the whole face was twisting into a sudden ghastly life; the lips drew back into a cavern of cackling mirth, and the fangs of Anubis were bared in terrible, avid lust.

The arms of the god crushed him in a stone embrace; the claw-like fingers tightened about his quivering, constricted throat; the gaping muzzle ravened as stone teeth sank jackal-like into his neck. Thus he met his doom—but it was a welcome doom after that final moment of revelation.

The natives found Peter's bloodless body lying crushed and crumpled at the idol's feet; lying before the statue of Anubis like a sacrifice of olden days. His father was beside him, and he too was dead.

They did not linger there in the forbidden, forgotten fastness of that ancient crypt, nor attempt to enter into the tomb behind. Instead, they reclosed the doors and returned home. There they said that the old and young *effendi* had killed themselves; and that is not surprizing. There were really no other indications for them to go by. The statue of Anubis stood once more serene in the shadows; still grimly guarding the secret vaults beyond, and there was no longer any hint of life in its eyes.

And so there is none who knows what Peter Barton knew just before he died; none to know that as Peter went down into death he stared upward and beheld the revelation which made that death a welcome deliverance.

For Peter learned what animated the body of the god; knew what lived within it in a dreadful, distorted way; knew what was being forced to kill him. Because as he died he gazed at last into the living stone face of Anubis—the living stone face that held *his father's tortured eyes.*

Witch-Burning

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

They burned a witch in Bingham Square
  Last Friday afternoon.
The faggot-smoke was blacker than
  The shadows on the moon;
The licking flames were strangely green
  Like fox-fire on the fen . . .
And she who cursed the godly folk
  Will never curse again.

They burned a witch in Bingham Square
  Before the village gate.
A huswife raised a skinny hand
  To damn her, tense with hate.
A huckster threw a jagged stone—
  Her pallid cheek ran red . . .
But there was something scornful in
  The way she held her head.

They burned a witch in Bingham Square;
  Her eyes were terror-wild.
She was a slight, a comely maid,
  No taller than a child.
They bound her fast against the stake
  And laughed to see her fear . . .
Her red lips muttered secret words
  That no one dared to hear.

They burned a witch in Bingham Square—
  But ere she swooned with pain
And ere her bones were sodden ash
  Beneath the sudden rain,
She set her mark upon that throng . . .
  For time can not erase
The echo of her anguished cries,
  The memory of her face.

"My curse upon you, Black George," she cried.

The Lost Door

By DOROTHY QUICK

An alluring but deadly horror out of past centuries menaced the life of the young American—a fascinating tale of a strange and eery love

I HAVE often wondered whether I would have urged Wrexler to come with me if I had known what Rougemont would do to him. I think—looking back—that even if I could have glimpsed the future, I would have acted in the same way, and that I would have brought him to Rougemont to fulfill his destiny.

As the boat cut its swift way through the waters on its journey to France, I had no thought of this. Nor had Wrexler.

He was happier than I had ever seen him. He had never been abroad before, and the boat was a source of wonder and enjoyment to him.

I myself was full of an eager anticipation of happy months to come. It hardly seemed possible that only a week had elapsed since I received the cable that had made such a change in my fortunes:

> Your father died yesterday. You are sole heir, provided you comply with conditions of his will, the principal one being that you spend six months of each year at Rougemont. If satisfactory, come at once.

It was signed by my father's lawyer.

I had no sorrow over my father's passing, except a deep regret that we could not have known the true relationship of father and son. At the death of my mother, my father had grown bitter and refused to see the innocent cause of her untimely passing. As a baby I had been brought up in the lodge of Rougemont, my father's magnificent château near Vichy. When I reached the age of four, I had been sent away to boarding-school. After that, my life had been a succession of schools; first in France, the adopted land of my father, then England, and finally St. Paul's in America.

In all justice to my parent, I must admit he gave me every advantage except the affection I would have cherished. By his own wish, I had never seen him in life; nor would I see him in death, for a later cable advised me that the funeral was over and his body already at rest in the beautiful Gothic mausoleum he had had built in his lifetime, after the manner of the ancients.

He had left me everything with only two injunctions, that a certain sum of money be set aside to keep the château always in its present condition and that I should spend at least half my time in it, and my children after me—a condition I was only too pleased to accept. All my life I had longed for a home.

I cabled at once that I would sail. A return cable brought me the news that I had unlimited funds to draw upon. It was then that I urged Wrexler to come with me.

Wrexler and I had been friends since the day when two lonely boys had been put by chance into the same room at school. We were so utterly unlike, it was perhaps the difference between us that held us together through the years. At St. Paul's, and later at Princeton, Gordon Wrexler had always been at the head of his class, whereas I inevitably tagged along at the bottom. The contrast between us was expressed not only in the color of our hair and eyes, but also in our dispositions. My greatest gift from fate was a sense of humor, and I suppose it was this quality of mine that particularly appealed to Wrexler. It seems as though I was the only one who could lift him out of the despondency into which he often plunged. As the years passed, and his tendency to depression intensified, he came to depend more and more upon me, and we grew closer together.

Strangely enough, the whiteness of his face and the gloom that exuded from him did not detract from his good looks. It only added to them. For the translucence of his skin made the thick, black hair that lay close to his head all the darker, while at the same time it brought out the deep black of his eyes, and the firm cut of his lips.

The night before we landed, we were standing on deck, at the rail, looking over the side straining our eyes for the first glimpse of the lights of Cherbourg, and Wrexler spoke of himself for the first time since we had left New York.

"You know, Jim, for perhaps the only

time in my life I feel at peace, as though something that I should have done long ago has been at last accomplished."

He was so solemn that I laughed a little. He stopped me suddenly: "It's true—I've always felt an urge within me, a blinding force pushing me toward something that is waiting for me: where, I do not know; what, I have no idea. For the first time, it's gone—that nameless urge that I knew not how to satisfy, and I feel that the call's being answered."

With the usual inanity of people at a loss for words, I said the first thing that came into my mind: "Perhaps Rougemont has been calling you."

"You've no idea what a relief it is," he continued, "not to feel constantly pulled with no way of knowing toward what, or how to go about answering the summons. I have often thought that I should take my life—that that was what was meant——" His voice trailed off.

This time I was not at a loss for words. I started to read him a lecture that would have done credit to Martin Luther or John Knox. At the end of my harangue Wrexler laughed, a rare thing for him, and put his arm through mine.

"All that's gone now. Didn't I tell you that at last in some strange way I am at peace?"

ROUGEMONT'S towers were visible long before we reached the great iron gates that had to be swung open to let us pass. For miles the great edifice dominated the landscape. The huge building had a soft, reddish tinge, from which I supposed it derived its name—Red Mountain. It was a fairy-tale palace perched on a mountain top. A great thrill went through me as I realized that this beautiful château was mine, and as we drove through the gates, up the winding road, through my own forest, the pride of possession swelled up in me and for the first time I began to understand why my father had never put his foot outside the great gates and the high wall that enclosed the acres that now belonged to me.

As we drove on, up the winding, narrow road, over the drawbridge that spanned the moat, into the courtyard, I understood more and more. Here was everything: beauty such as I had never dreamed, forests stocked with game, running brooks full of fish, a lake, and farther off, a farm—I could glimpse its thatched roofs—to supply our wants. Rougemont was a world in itself.

The high carved door was swung open as Wrexler and I got out of the car. Monsieur de Carrier, my father's lawyer, advanced to meet us, a friendly smile on his Santa Claus countenance. I shook hands, introduced Wrexler as "a very good friend who is going to stay with me."

Monsieur Carrier's face fell. Clearly Wrexler's being with me was a disappointment. Nevertheless, he greeted him politely, as he ushered us in.

That moment Rougemont took me to its heart and won me for its own.

Imagine Amboise, or any of the great French châteaux, suddenly restored to itself as it was in the days of the Medici, and you have a small idea of Rougemont. For we had stepped out of the present into the past. Carrier, Wrexler and I were anachronisms; everything else was in keeping with the dead centuries. Even the servants were in doublet and hose of a sort of cerulean blue, with great slashes puffed with crimson silk.

I think I gasped. At any rate, Monsieur Carrier saw my astonishment. "It is your father's will, my boy. He always kept it so, and wore the costume of former days, himself. He greatly admired the first Francis. In your rooms you will find costumes prepared for you.

For the last six months of his life, he was making ready for his son." There was an odd sort of pride in Carrier's voice.

I remembered now that my father had written for my measurements. I had thought he meant to make me a present, but when time passed and I heard nothing, the incident had slipped from my mind. I looked at Wrexler, expecting to see some sign of amusement on his face, but he stood quietly looking at the tapestry that hung half-way up the grand stairway. There was a dreamy, far-away expression in his eyes.

"May I speak before your friend?" Carrier asked.

I nodded. The servants had already disappeared with our luggage. I threw myself down on a long, low bench, and Carrier sat opposite me.

"You understood the terms of your father's will, of course," Carrier began, "that you must live here six months, but you did not know that you must live here, as he did, in the past. If you do not, then Rougemont goes to your father's steward, with the same conditions—to be kept always as it is; with only a small sum set aside for you."

I said nothing. Driving along the road from Paris, it would have seemed fantastic, but here—under the spell of Rougemont—it seemed as though anything else would be impossible.

CARRIER went on, "You will be Grand Seigneur—Lord of the Manor, in the old style. You may have your guests if you like, but they too must conform with the rules." Here he glanced at Wrexler, who still stood as though he were in a trance. "The other six months you are free to do as you please, spend what you like of the money not needed for Rougemont—that is, *if you want to go anywhere else.*"

Evidently he had finished his speech. At the time I did not recognize the significance of his last words. "I am willing to submit to the conditions; only"—a sudden thought struck me—"I don't want to lose all touch with the outside world. Can I go to Vichy—to get papers and so forth? I don't suppose they had papers in Francis First's time."

Monsieur de Carrier smiled. "My dear boy, your father didn't wish to make a prisoner of you. You may go to Vichy if you like. But you must not be away from Rougemont more than twenty-four consecutive hours during the six months you are in residence.

"So far as the papers, etc., are concerned, they will be at the lodge. There is also a telephone, and your own clothes will be kept there. After tonight, nothing of 1935 must come within these halls, but you are free to go to the lodge any time you want to. You can get in touch with me also, if you desire further information. De Lacy, the steward, will look out for you. He knows your father's ways. Now permit me to congratulate you and say *au revoir*, my young friend."

Monsieur de Carrier got up on his stubby fat legs, made a little bow to me, another to Wrexler which went unheeded.

I too arose. "It will seem strange, but I'll do my best."

"One other thing," Monsieur de Carrier was all of a sudden very grave. "In two weeks' time you will be given a key. It unlocks a casket you will find in the library. In it you will find a message from your father. Adieu, my boy, I wish you well."

With a click of the heels and a friendly smile, he was gone.

I turned to Wrexler. "What do you think of it?" I asked.

Wrexler did not answer. He still stood gazing up at the stairway. The

wide, marble steps curved upward. Along the sides, the intricate carving was beautiful in its lacy delicateness.

At that moment, however, I was alarmed for my friend. His attitude was rigid, and his eyes were glassy. I put my hand on his shoulder. "Wrexler!"

My action galvanized him to life. "Another minute and she would have reached the last step! Now she is gone."

This was madness! There had been no one there. I said as much.

Wrexler turned and faced me. "But there was," he said eagerly, "the most beautiful girl I have ever seen, all done up in some old costume: great, wide skirts, little waist, and a high lace collar. She had bronze curls, great blue eyes and the loveliest face! I saw her immediately we came in. She looked at both of us, but she smiled at me!"

I was in a quandary. Until now I had not given the staircase more than a perfunctory glance. For all I knew, she might have been one of the servants, peeping to see her new master. To Wrexler, impressionable, strange creature that he was, the one glance might have so registered on his mind that he kept on seeing her; for certainly she had not been there when I looked. It seemed best to make light of the whole matter.

"Anyway, she's gone now. At least I can explain the costume. I take it you didn't hear Carrier's announcements?"

Wrexler shook his head. I proceeded to enlighten him.

Instead of teasing me about the strange conditions my father's will had imposed upon me, he was enthusiastic about the idea. "It's the one period in history that has always interested me! Jim, we're in luck! Imagine stepping back into Medici France for six months, shutting out the world! Who knows but that Catherine herself may have stayed here, or Marguerite de Valois—the Marguerite of Marguerites! Beautiful, but no more beautiful than that girl on the stairs. I can hardly wait to see her again."

I heartily hoped that he would see her, and that she was not entirely a creature of his imagination. If she was real, I too was eager to meet her.

Wrexler interrupted my thoughts.

"I feel as though I had come home," he said. "I'm crazy to explore. Let's go shed these ugly things and begin to really live. Why, it's been this I've been waiting for! It's lucky we're the same size."

Out of his irrelevance, I gathered the trend of his thought. "I wonder where we go," I began.

Almost as though he had heard my words, a tall, commanding figure stepped into the hall. He was attired richly in damask of a lovely, soft blue with the same slashes of crimson that the servant livery had shown, but in this case of finer material. He was a handsome man of about thirty-four. His beard was pointed and he had a small mustache. His long legs were encased in silken hose and he wore a dagger thrust through his belt.

"De Lacy, at your service, my lord," he announced as he made a deep bow.

I extended my hand, somewhat at a loss to know how to greet my father's steward, who was clearly a man of some importance and who, but for me, would be owner of Rougemont.

Instead of shaking hands, he dropped on one knee and kissed my hand—a proceeding which embarrassed me very much.

On my motioning him to rise, he did so with a lithe grace: "I suppose you want to change your strange clothes, my lord, and see your quarters?"

I nodded and introduced Wrexler. De Lacy bowed. "Monsieur Wrexler would like to be near you?" Then he added,

"We have some twenty or thirty suites, my lord."

Wrexler said he would prefer to be close at hand, and together we followed de Lacy up the marble stairway into a new world.

Wrexler was at ease immediately in his doublet and hose. The rich, embroidered garments seemed to suit him as modern clothes never did. He looked handsomer than ever. He also told me that the costume of the Medici was becoming to me, and truly when I caught a glimpse of myself mirrored in the pond —for the château did not possess a large mirror—I was not ill pleased with the result. But, by the end of the week, I still felt strange in my new attire, whereas Wrexler from the beginning wore his as if to the manor born.

But I anticipate. That first night we donned two of the outfits which the valet whom de Lacy introduced to me had put out. Our own clothes disappeared, and much to my annoyance, with them my cigarettes.

We ate dinner in state, upon a raised dais at one end of a great hall. At either side below us were long, narrow tables filled with people. Dressed also in keeping with the period, they made a wonderful picture and comprised, I supposed, my court or retinue. De Lacy presented me to them with a flourish, and they all filed by and kissed my hand, then went to their places.

When Wrexler and I were seated, they too sat down. When I began to talk, they filled the hall with gay chattering. From a minstrel gallery at the other end of the room came soft strains of music.

De Lacy stood behind me pouring my wine. One thing I noticed was that in the whole room—and there must have been two hundred people at least—there were no older men or women. In fact, de Lacy was the oldest of the lot; the others ranged from about sixteen to thirty.

"How did my father get all these people together?" I asked de Lacy.

"Most of them, my lord, were born at Rougemont. Still others were adopted and brought here almost as soon as they were born. None of us has ever been outside Rougemont gates." De Lacy was quite matter-of-fact as he made his statement.

Wrexler was searching the hall with his eyes, as he listened to my steward.

"And you?" I looked at de Lacy.

"I, too, my lord, know nothing of your outside world, nor do I want to. Why should I, who am happy here? My family live down at the farm, but his Highness, your father, became interested in me. He brought me into the château, had me educated, and looked after me, himself. Eventually he made me steward of Rougemont. It is a great honor he conferred upon me and I shall do my best to help you, my lord."

Of a sudden I saw what my father's life-work had been: to rear a court to people Rougemont. My father had been twenty-five at my mother's death. He had died at fifty-eight. He had had thirty-three years to make his dream come true.

"Where are the parents of the ones who were born at Rougemont?"

"At their own places, or the farms, my lord. Rougemont has over a thousand acres and several manors upon it, where people whom his Highness your father advanced over others, live. They all serve their ruler in some way, in return for what is given them. Only the people of the lodge are in touch with the Outside, which we have been taught to look upon with scorn. Here we have everything, and to be taken to the château itself is the ambition of everyone on the estate."

I saw it all; not, of course, every intricacy of the elaborate system my father had evolved, but at least a glimmer of the truth. And I marveled at the character of a man who had taken children out of the world to make his own world and then had the patience to wait for them to grow up; to form his court—the court he planned for me. Yes, in my egotism I thought it was for me! Two weeks were to pass before I learned what his real reason had been.

Into my reflections, Wrexler broke abruptly, "She is not here. Ask de Lacy about her; her beauty haunts me. Already I am in love with her."

I was not surprized. Nothing, I felt, could at this point surprize me, so much had happened in the last few hours. If my father had arisen from the floor like Hamlet's ghost, I would have greeted him quite casually.

"Is there a young girl here with bronze curls and blue eyes?" I asked obediently.

A shadow crossed de Lacy's handsome face. For the first time he hesitated. "There is no one here that answers that description. May I ask why you——"

"My friend saw her on the stairway."

I caught a murmur from de Lacy's lips. "So soon!" it sounded like, but before I could question further, he said aloud, "I have leave to depart and join my lady?" And before I could answer, he bowed himself away to take a seat at one of the tables below.

Wrexler looked over his wine goblet. "The man lied. I saw recognition of the description in his eyes."

"We'll get the truth out of him later," I countered. "Isn't it fine to actually eat chicken with your fingers, and not feel you are committing a social error!"

We did not get any information out of de Lacy later. To Wrexler's insistent questionings he was at first noncommittal, and after a bit, downright curt. I poured oil on the troubled waters by suggesting that as it was late, we would wait until morning to see the library and the left wing of the château.

With a smile of relief, de Lacy ushered us to our chambers. My retiring was a kind of ceremony. It amused me, but I had a nagging little thought in the back of my mind that all this etiquette would become boring after a while.

As the last man bowed himself out of my room, de Lacy bent low. "My lord, there are guards at your door. You have only to call if you require anything."

I thanked him once more. Greatly to my embarrassment, he again kissed my hand. "Your servant to the death!" he cried, and drew the curtains about my high-canopied bed.

I knew that outside the red damask, two huge candles were burning, but the curtain shut out their light and I was smothered in darkness. I made a mental note that I must arrange somehow for air in my room. The French idea of banishing night air did not coincide with my American habits. Tonight I was too weary to get up and attend to it. My thoughts were racing back and forth among the strange events of the day, but before I could focus them into any kind of order, sleep descended upon me.

I had a strange dream. In it, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen came and parted the red damask curtains. Framed against the dark oak panels of my room, she stood looking down upon me. Her hair was red gold, and her eyes had all the sapphire tints of the world stored in their depths. Her pale, white face was oval in shape and balanced perfectly upon a slender neck. Her

lips were sweetly curved and her nose delicately shaped. As she bent over me, I could see the rounded curve of her bosom. One slim hand reached out and touched my cheek. It was like the touch of a falling rose petal.

In my dream I lay asleep, yet I was conscious of this lovely creature. I watched her through closed eyelids, and held my breath, hoping she would kiss me. It seemed as though I had never desired anything so much.

A half-smile hovered on her lips, but her eyes told me nothing. She leaned lower. A faint perfume pervaded my senses, and then I felt her lips upon my forehead. A great cold swept over me at her touch—swept me down, down into blackness, and I knew no more.

When I awoke, the sun was pouring through the opened curtains. I reached for a cigarette—my first conscious thought upon awakening—and not finding my case under the pillow, suddenly realized my new surroundings. At the same time, I remembered my dream. "Wrexler and his talk of a red-haired beauty is responsible for that," I thought as I clapped my hands.

De Lacy came in so quickly I knew he must have been waiting outside the door. He started when he saw the curtain of my bed had been opened. "Did you not pull them?" I asked.

He shook his head. I said no more, and the ceremony of my arising began.

When I had bathed in a great sunken tub—fortunately Diana de Poictiers had had her daily bath in the far-off time—I sought Wrexler.

Together we breakfasted, and then I announced to de Lacy that we wished to inspect the rest of the château. He led us to the left wing, and took us through suite after suite. Beautifully furnished, the château was a veritable treasure house. An antiquarian would have gone mad with delight.

I noticed that de Lacy had avoided two heavily built doors opposite the ballroom. When we had returned from our tour, I stopped before them. "And here?" I asked.

"The picture gallery, my lord," he responded unwillingly, and swung the doors open. There was an unhappy expression on his face.

The room was long and narrow, and the walls except for the windows were lined with portraits. We walked slowly down the length of the room, looking at the portraits of a dead and gone race.

"The former owners of the château?" I asked. De Lacy nodded.

Suddenly I looked at the part of the room facing the door which he had entered. At first we had been too far away to distinguish anything about it except that there was only one large painting hanging in the center. Now that I was nearer, I could see the painting, and I caught my breath in astonishment; for there was the portrait of the lady of my dream, smiling down on me.

Wrexler caught my arm, "That's the girl—the one I saw on the stairs."

"That is the portrait of Helene, Mademoiselle d'Harcourt, daughter of the Lord of Harcourt, who owned this château," de Lacy's voice broke in.

Wrexler and I exclaimed simultaneously, "But I——" and "She is——"

De Lacy looked at us strangely. "It is from her that the château got its new name Rougemont—*Red Mountain*. Before that, it was called Hôtel d'Harcourt. Mademoiselle Helene was very beautiful, as you can see, *Messieurs*, and she had many suitors. At last, from among them, she chose an English lord. One of the discarded lovers, Black George—*le Georges Noir*—vowed that she should

not belong to the Englishman, or ever leave Rougemont.

"She laughed, Mademoiselle Helene, and her father, the Lord d'Harcourt, laughed too, for he had many men at arms and was rich and powerful. Black George did not laugh, he only set his lips grimly. The wedding day came and the beautiful Helene married the English lord in the great hall, but just as he took her in his arms for the nuptial kiss, there arose a great noise outside. It was Black George attacking the château.

"The English lord, with Helene's kiss warm upon his lips, went forth to battle. There was a fight such as these peaceful lands had never seen, and the mountain ran red with blood. Black George was the victor. He slew the Englishman, he slew the Lord of Harcourt, and his men hacked to pieces the defenders of the château.

"Black George, followed by his men, their swords red with blood, came into the great hall where Helene d'Harcourt sat on the throne, her face whiter than her wedding dress. Black George flung her lover's body at her feet, and the women of the household who were crouched about the throne cried aloud with terror. The fair Helene did not cry, nor did she moan; she only looked straight at Black George, and there was that in her gaze that silenced everyone in the great hall; even Black George stepped back a pace.

"Then Helene d'Harcourt rose and went down to her love, the English lord who for a brief moment had been her husband. She knelt beside him and kissed his cold lips; then she took her wedding veil and laid it over his body.

"All the while there was silence in the great hall, while men and women watched the slim girl say farewell to the man she loved. They watched almost as though they were under a spell. But as the veil fell into place, Black George laughed a long laugh that rang through the room; then he turned to his followers, and cried loudly, 'The women are yours —take them as you will, all but that one who belongs to me.' He gestured toward Helene and laughed again.

"Helene d'Harcourt stood erect and pointed her slender hand at Black George. 'Wait,' she cried, and there was a quality in her voice that made her listeners tremble. 'I shall belong to no one until my lover comes for me, and till he comes, wo to you, Black George, who are well named! Wo to you and to all men, for I curse you with a mighty curse, the curse of a broken heart. And I curse all men for their black and bitter deeds. Year after year, century after century, I will take my vengeance for the wrongs I have suffered, and no man shall be free until my lover comes again and we find bliss together.'

"And while the eyes of the whole hall were riveted upon her, she plunged the dagger she had taken from her lover's belt into her heart. For a second she stood swaying; then she crumpled and fell beside the English lord.

"Black George caught her and held her in his arms. 'My curse upon you, Black George!' she cried.

"Black George could also curse—'Never shall you leave Rougemont to find your lover, and never shall he come, until——' and then his voice died away as her head fell backward over his arm. The fair Helene was beyond his reach.

"For a minute more the people in the great hall were paralyzed by the force of the terrible words that they had heard, but with the girl's death they were released from the spell and a fury swept over the men. They rushed upon the women and dragged them forth. Black George took Helene's body and carried it away, but where he buried her no one

knew, nor could any discover; for the next day he was found in the great hall raving mad, and the people said that Helene's curse was a potent one, that already it had wreaked vengeance on the one who had wronged her most.

"From that day, the château was called Rougemont. The d'Harcourts were all dead and the place fell into other hands. Then there grew up the rumor that the château was haunted, that the fair Helene roamed through its halls, cut off from her lover, and doomed to stay within these walls by Black George's curse."

De Lacy silent, Wrexler and I looked at the portrait. My own feelings were in a turmoil. It had been a ghost's lips that had touched me last night; yet surely no ghosts could have been so beautiful or seemed so real.

Wrexler turned to me, "It would be the curse that has always been upon me that when I fell in love it would be with a ghost!" His eyes were vivid, shining brightly in his pale face. "I knew when I saw her on the stairway that I loved her."

"There is a rumor," said de Lacy, "that the man who sees the fair Helene will meet with some misadventure, unless she gives him a kiss. Then he is protected from her wrath."

I started. Wrexler smiled. "She kissed me with her eyes. I am not afraid."

"The fair Helene makes men suffer to make up for the wrong Black George did her. For years she has not been seen at Rougemont. Last night when you described her, I was afraid. My lord," de Lacy turned to me, "send your friend away. If she only looked at him and smiled, there is a grave and deadly danger for him, more deadly because it may be unexplainable. Men upon whom the fair Helene has smiled have met strange deaths."

As Wrexler looked up at the portrait, an inward light illumined his countenance. "I am not afraid," he repeated.

"There are many deaths. There is the death of the spirit as well as that of the body. I beg you to go while there is time, friend of my lord." There was real feeling in de Lacy's voice.

I too felt afraid for Wrexler. The strange, unworldly feeling he had always had, the pulling toward something he knew not what, made me doubly fearful. Had the fair Helene been calling him all this time, across the world? For myself I had no fear. She had kissed me, and besides, even death at her hands would have been preferable to never seeing her again. In these last few minutes I had realized that I too was in love with Helene, that I could hardly wait for the night, in hopes that she might visit me again.

Resolutely I put my own feelings in the background, for at the moment Wrexler was of paramount importance. If there was anything in de Lacy's story —and from my own experience I was sure there was—Wrexler was in danger. I turned to him. "If anything happened to you, I could never forgive myself. Perhaps you'd better go. I could arrange a trip for you, and later—meet you."

Somehow de Lacy seemed one of us. I had no hesitancy in speaking before him. He seemed a part of my new life. With the strange suddenness that comes on rare occasions, we were already friends.

Wrexler looked at me, then back at the portrait. Helene d'Harcourt, her red hair gleaming, smiled down upon us. Before he spoke, I knew what he would say, because in his place I would have said the same, "Unless you kick me out, I want to stay."

I put my hand on Wrexler's shoulder. "So be it. Come along, let's see the library, then we'll know all of Rougemont. We've seen everything else."

Wrenching his eyes away from the portrait, Wrexler followed us.

The library was beautiful, with paneled walls that had rows and rows of books sunk in their depths. There was a long, oaken table, and on the center of it stood a carved, gilded box, the casket which held my father's letter. I wished then that I could read it at once. I wish now that I could have, but perhaps it is better that I did not; at least things moved as the fates ordained, and the responsibility for what occurred was not mine.

THE next three days were quiet, happy ones. Nothing occurred. I had no ghostly visitant and Wrexler saw nothing of Helene. Under de Lacy's expert guidance, we rode over the estate, hunted with falcons, a pleasing sport which we both took to our hearts; mingled with my court, found the people charming and highly cultivated. We took lessons in the old dances, visited the manor houses. It was all very gay and amusing, and I had no longing for the outside world. I did not even go down to the lodge for news.

There were many details of the estate management that I had to go into with de Lacy. We spent several hours each morning going over the affairs of Rougemont. It was virtually a small kingdom, and everything was referred to me.

Necessarily, the time I spent with de Lacy on such matters, Wrexler was alone. He had changed a great deal since we had come to Rougemont. He had come alive, and he threw himself into everything with a curious intensity. He was like a person who has been very ill, who suddenly finding himself better and fearing it is only temporary, clutches life with both hands. He devoted long hours to reading the records of the d'Harcourts, until he knew the family history as well as his own.

I did not mention Helene, although there was seldom a moment when she was out of my thoughts. I found myself watching for her day and night, and I caught the same tension in Wrexler's eyes as he searched the shadows.

The third night she came again, not to me, but to Wrexler; and although he was my friend, I almost hated him because he had seen her and I had not. He told me next morning as we walked along the lake shore.

"Jim," he said suddenly, "I saw her last night. She came to my room. She drew aside the curtains of the bed, and leaned over me. I can't describe my sensations. It was almost as though life were suspended in space—like a bridge over a timeless sea."

I had nothing to say. I knew so well how he felt.

"She leaned closer and closer to me," Wrexler went on; "then she smiled, and before I could find my breath to speak, she was gone. This is the second time she has smiled at me. I felt a nameless fear, as though there was a threatening quality in those red lips. She looked at me as though I might have been Black George himself."

In that moment, all my envy was swept away by anxiety for my friend. Indeed, I wished she had kissed him, for then he would have been safe. I started to speak, to beg Wrexler to leave Rougemont, but before the words could leave my mouth, I saw her. She was standing in the path some distance away, directly in line with my eyes, and she was shaking her head impressively.

I knew instantly what she meant. I was not to send Wrexler away. He

could not see her, because at the moment he was facing me, his hand on my arm. His fingers touching me were not quite steady. It brought me back to reality. "Wrexler," I cried, "you—could leave Rougemont."

Her eyes clouded with anger. She looked at me reproachfully, commandingly. As though I were dreaming, I heard my own voice, "I don't want you to go, I would be lonely without you. Perhaps there is no danger."

Wrexler looked at me curiously. "There is risk, I know that, but I do not care. I am like a man who has eaten a strange and terrible drug, who knows the danger, but can not resist it. I will stay."

Beyond him Helene smiled a satisfied smile, as she looked at Wrexler's broad back. It made me feel afraid. Then suddenly her gaze swept to me, and the smile changed into a languorous one that promised all things. My heart beat faster, and I forgot my fear.

Wrexler moved restlessly, turning so that we were side by side. Even in that second Helene had vanished—how, I do not know. One minute she was there, the next she was not.

We walked along slowly. Finally Wrexler spoke. "No matter what happens, and I mean that widely, my friend, you are not to regret. For a little time I have been happy. I have come alive. I have loved, even though the woman that I love is a wraith. I have felt a sensation I thought never to feel. If I could hold her in my arms and press my lips to hers, I would count the world well lost."

I could say nothing, because—God pity me!—I knew just how he felt.

THE days slipped away quickly. I did not see Helene again, but Wrexler did. Almost every day he met her in the rose garden, where they spent long hours.

He told me that she was always elusive, but at the same time promising that some day she would be kinder. He said her voice was like golden honey and that without her he could not face life.

Once I saw them myself, as I came from an interview with de Lacy. As I approached the rose garden through an opening in the arches, I saw them sitting side by side on the marble bench, and of the two, Helene looked the more earthly. For Wrexler had grown paler and more ethereal every day. His eyes were luminous as he looked at her adoringly.

She saw me first, and her lips curved sweetly. She rose in a leisurely fashion, turned her back to me and dropped a low curtsy to Wrexler; then while I still watched, she extended one slender hand to him. He bent over it, his lips touched its soft whiteness. A little laugh like the tinkle of silver bells swept through the garden; then she was gone.

Wrexler stood like a man in a trance. I came quickly forward. "You are playing with fire!" I cried.

Wrexler roused. "You saw?"

I nodded.

"Have you ever seen anything more beautiful, more lovely?"

I shook my head.

"I'm not afraid any more. She has promised me——"

But what Helene had promised I was not to know, for Wrexler's mouth shut with a snap. When I pressed him, he shook his head. Finally he said, carefully choosing his words with a reluctance that was strange to him:

"To me is to be granted something beyond the knowledge of mortal man. I can tell you no more, but some day you will know." There was an expression on his face that transcended earth.

The next night I spoke to de Lacy

and told him my fears. Wrexler was spending more and more time in the rose garden. I hardly saw him, and he would not discuss anything with me. Even at the stately, elegantly served meals, he barely spoke. He always seemed to be listening, waiting.

De Lacy shared my fears, but he suggested nothing to help. "He has been marked, my lord," he said gravely. "We can only pray. But even in prayers there is no refuge, for Helene is beyond such things."

"Surely——" I began to remonstrate.

"The power of evil is as strong as the power of good, or at least there is little between them. Helene herself is bound fast by hate of Black George."

Curses live, I knew that—witness the lasting quality of the curses and spells of the Egyptian priests. But Helene was not evil. I said as much.

De Lacy shook his head. "She is cut off from her lover. She does not feel kindly toward men. Remember she promised vengeance century after century, that day in the great hall."

That night in the silence of my chamber I called her name. "Helene! Helene!" I flung my agonized summons into the night, but there was no answer.

I went over in my mind the tales de Lacy had told me of the havoc she had caused; how one man had cast himself down from the highest turret, crying her name; how another had been found dead in the rose garden, horror frozen on his face. There were still others who had looked upon her, and death or madness came as the result.

The more I thought of these tales of terror, the more I feared for Wrexler. At last I could stand no more. I thrust my arms into the rich velvet robe that had taken the place of my bath gown, and went to Wrexler's room. The guards stood back to let me pass.

I did not mean to wake him, but some inner foreboding made me feel I must know that he was safe.

As I drew aside the curtains of his bed, I could not entirely stifle the cry that came to my lips, for the bed was empty. But upon the pillow lay a small, white rose. It was the kind they use in funeral wreaths in France. My heart almost stopped beating.

The rose garden!—or perhaps the library. A more normal thought struck me. Wrexler might have wanted to read. I rushed into the hall, to find de Lacy waiting for me, summoned by the guards. He held a silver candle-stick in which a tall, white candle burned.

"The library!" I gasped. That was nearest, we should try it first. De Lacy knew my meaning. He had instantly grasped the situation and his face was white and tense.

Together we descended the curving stairway. Together we reached the library. Then, motioning de Lacy behind me, I swung open the door.

The room was brightly illuminated, although not one of the candles had been lit. In the middle of it stood Wrexler, with Helene in his arms. Their lips were close-locked.

It was a picture that an artist would have delighted to paint: the stiff, crimson skirts of Helene d'Harcourt's gown stood wide on either side, and Wrexler's blue doublet and hose against them was in bold relief. His long over-sleeves edged with fur hung gracefully.

I could not speak. This mating of man with ghost was almost more than my poor mortal brain could bear, yet with every atom of my being I wished that I could have been in Wrexler's place. I remembered the one chaste kiss I had had from her, and I almost fainted at the thought of possessing those lips for my own, as Wrexler was doing. Strangely

enough, mingling with this emotion was another—a feeling of fear and anxiety for my friend. Cold horror that froze my blood kept me rooted to the spot.

Behind me de Lacy had fallen to his knees. I could hear him repeating the Latin words of a prayer. All at once I saw where the light was coming from. The entire north wall, ordinarily lined with books, had gone. In its stead was a stone wall, and in the center of the wall was a low-hung Gothic door, carved and ornate. It was standing open, and beyond was a pale, luminous yellow mist. I could see nothing of what else was beyond the door, for the yellow haze filled the entire space. It was like a golden fog, and its radiance lighted the library with a strange, unearthly glow. Its luminosity glowed upon Helene and Wrexler like a spotlight.

For a moment I thought Rougemont, de Lacy, everything of the past weeks, must have been a dream and that I was watching a cinema of past days. All at once, before my astonished eyes Helene gently drew her lips away from Wrexler's. She slipped from his arms and extended her hands to him. "Come," I heard her say.

Wrexler had been right: her voice was like golden honey. It was like the music of willow trees in early spring. Wrexler grasped her hands. For the first time I saw his face. Joy transfigured it, such joy as I have never seen before, and never shall see again.

Helene moved backward, slowly but surely, drawing him toward the little Gothic door that stood open. With her soft lips half parted, she whispered, "Come."

"Wrexler," I cried suddenly.

He did not hear me. As he looked into her eyes, he might have been a bird charmed by a snake. Nothing could break through the spell that bound him.

They were nearer the door. Each second brought them closer to it. Now Helene was on the other side. The golden mist concentrated upon her, until she looked like a goddess in its eery light.

"Wrexler! Wrexler!" The words tore through my throat.

Wrexler stepped over the threshold. Through the golden mist I saw him clasp Helene in his arms again. I saw her smile triumphantly at me, as she raised her lips to his. There was something in her eyes that filled me with horror.

The mist swirled about them until I could barely discover the outlines of their figures through its gleaming haze. Then the door swung slowly shut.

I awoke to feverish activity. "Wrexler! Wrexler!" I shouted and rushed forward to the door.

I grasped the iron ring that hung in its center. I pulled on it with all my might. When I found that it resisted all my efforts I began beating against the door itself. Presently I felt myself being pulled away.

"There is no use, my lord," de Lacy's voice was saying. "The door is gone."

"Gone!" I ejaculated, and even as I spoke I saw what he meant. The north wall of the library was lined with books as it always had been. I had been beating upon them impotently.

I looked down at my hands; the knuckles were raw and bleeding, just as they would have been from pounding on a heavily carved wooden door. De Lacy caught my meaning. "The door was there, my lord. It was the lost door—the door behind which Black George buried Helene d'Harcourt. It had been lost for centuries."

I sank into a chair, weakly, for now the fact that I had lost Wrexler, my friend, was paramount. "I will tear down the walls until I find it."

"That has been done, my lord, and it

has never been found. It will never be found again. Only for a brief moment you and I have been granted a glimpse of something we can not understand."

"And Wrexler——" I groaned.

"He was happy," de Lacy comforted. "No matter what happened after, he has had happiness such as I have never seen before."

My head pitched forward and I knew no more.

THREE days later, I was escorted to the library by de Lacy, to whom since Wrexler's loss I was more devoted than ever. With great ceremony I was given the key to the gilded casket, then left alone.

Seated in the great chair before the oaken table, I unlocked the casket. It contained many pages closely written in my father's hand. In them were instructions as to my future conduct, my care of Rougemont, what he had done and what he expected me to do. But the lines that interested me most were these:

"I bought Rougemont for your mother, shortly after your birth, because when riding through this country, she saw and loved it. It was a purchase that cost me dear. For Rougemont held a curse and an avenging spirit in the form of a beautiful young girl who could not bear to see others' happiness. So my wife died.

"Two months after your mother's death, I first saw la belle Helene. We fought a long battle, she and I, but I was strong, my son, because I loved your mother. No other woman's charms could lure me to my doom. Finally I made a bargain with a ghost.

"She hated modern things and longed for Rougemont to be great again. I promised to restore the château to its former splendor, to make it just as it had been in her days, and in return she promised immunity to me, and afterward to you, and to all my court when I should have established it.

"I restored Rougemont. I repeopled it. With her help and advice, I have made it as it was in her own day.

"She showed me the hidden treasure vaults of the d'Harcourts so that I would have enough money to purchase the things she wanted.

"She too has kept her bargain, for I and my court have lived happily here unmolested. Only when an outsider came or someone disobeyed or longed for the outside world, has she wreaked vengeance.

"She has sworn to give you the kiss that promises immunity, the night you come. Only, beware, my son, whom you bring here from the world you know, and beware of the lovely Helene. Old man as I am, devoted to your mother's memory as I am, she can still make my pulses leap.

"Above all things, if she shows you the Lost Door, do not be tempted to cross its threshold, for that way, unless you are the reincarnation of the Englishman, annihilation lies."

There was more, pages more, of other matters, but I left them for another day. Alone there in the library, I let my eyes wander to where the little Gothic door had been.

Had Wrexler been the Englishman come back to earth to claim his bride? Could that account for the strange, unsatisfied longings he had always had, his unearthly feelings, his unlikeness to other people? Or was he Black George, lured back to Rougemont for Helene's vengeance? I hope for his sake that was not the explanation; that he and Helene

would find bliss waiting for them behind the Lost Door and I would never see Helene again.

The days pass. I do what my father set out for me to do. I keep his bargain with the ghost of the fair Helene. I never leave Rougemont. I have no desire to, for I am always hoping that some day I shall again find the Lost Door.

Doom of the House of Duryea

By EARL PEIRCE, JR.

A powerful story of stark horror, and the dreadful thing that happened in a lone house in the Maine woods

ARTHUR DURYEA, a young, handsome man, came to meet his father for the first time in twenty years. As he strode into the hotel lobby—long strides which had the spring of elastic in them—idle eyes lifted to appraise him, for he was an impressive figure, somehow grim with exaltation.

The desk clerk looked up with his habitual smile of expectation; how-do-you-do-Mr.-so-and-so, and his fingers strayed to the green fountain pen which stood in a holder on the desk.

Arthur Duryea cleared his throat, but still his voice was clogged and unsteady. To the clerk he said:

"I'm looking for my father, Doctor Henry Duryea. I understand he is registered here. He has recently arrived from Paris."

The clerk lowered his glance to a list of names. "Doctor Duryea is in suite 600, sixth floor." He looked up, his eyebrows arched questioningly. "Are you staying too, sir, Mr. Duryea?"

Arthur took the pen and scribbled his name rapidly. Without a further word, neglecting even to get his key and own room number, he turned and walked to the elevators. Not until he reached his father's suite on the sixth floor did he make an audible noise, and this was a mere sigh which fell from his lips like a prayer.

The man who opened the door was unusually tall, his slender frame clothed in tight-fitting black. He hardly dared to smile. His clean-shaven face was pale, an almost livid whiteness against the sparkle in his eyes. His jaw had a bluish luster.

"Arthur!" The word was scarcely a whisper. It seemed choked up quietly, as if it had been repeated time and again on his thin lips.

Arthur Duryea felt the kindliness of

those eyes go through him, and then he was in his father's embrace.

Later, when these two grown men had regained their outer calm, they closed the door and went into the drawing-room. The elder Duryea held out a humidor of fine cigars, and his hand shook so hard when he held the match that his son was forced to cup his own hands about the flame. They both had tears in their eyes, but their eyes were smiling.

Henry Duryea placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "This is the happiest day of my life," he said. "You can never know how much I have longed for this moment."

Arthur, looking into that glance, realized, with growing pride, that he had loved his father all his life, despite any of those things which had been cursed against him. He sat down on the edge of a chair.

"I—I don't know how to act," he confessed. "You surprize me, Dad. You're so different from what I had expected."

"He lay like a waxen figure tied to his bed."

A cloud came over Doctor Duryea's features. "What *did* you expect, Arthur?" he demanded quickly. "An evil eye? A shaven head and knotted jowls?"

"Please, Dad—no!" Arthur's words clipped short. "I don't think I ever really visualized you. I knew you would be a splendid man. But I thought you'd look older, more like a man who has really suffered."

"I have suffered, more than I can ever describe. But seeing you again, and the prospect of spending the rest of my life with you, has more than compensated for my sorrows. Even during the twenty years we were apart I found an ironic joy in learning of your progress in college, and in your American game of football."

"Then you've been following my work?"

"Yes, Arthur; I've received monthly reports ever since you left me. From my study in Paris I've been really close to you, working out your problems as if they were my own. And now that the twenty years are completed, the ban which kept us apart is lifted for ever. From now on, son, we shall be the closest of companions—unless your Aunt Cecilia has succeeded in her terrible mission."

The mention of that name caused an unfamiliar chill to come between the two men. It stood for something, in each of them, which gnawed their minds like a malignancy. But to the younger Duryea, in his intense effort to forget the awful past, her name as well as her madness must be forgotten.

He had no wish to carry on this subject of conversation, for it betrayed an internal weakness which he hated. With forced determination, and a ludicrous lift of his eyebrows, he said,

"Cecilia is dead, and her silly superstition is dead also. From now on, Dad, we're going to enjoy life as we should. Bygones are really bygones in this case."

Doctor Duryea closed his eyes slowly, as though an exquisite pain had gone through him.

"Then you have no indignation?" he questioned. "You have none of your aunt's hatred?"

"Indignation? Hatred?" Arthur laughed aloud. "Ever since I was twelve years old I have disbelieved Cecilia's stories. I have known that those horrible things were impossible, that they belonged to the ancient category of mythology and tradition. How, then, can I be indignant, and how can I hate you? How can I do anything but recognize Cecilia for what she was—a mean, frustrated woman, cursed with an insane grudge against you and your family? I tell you, Dad, that nothing she has ever said can possibly come between us again."

Henry Duryea nodded his head. His lips were tight together, and the muscles in his throat held back a cry. In that same soft tone of defense he spoke further, doubting words.

"Are you so sure of your subconscious mind, Arthur? Can you be so certain that you are free from all suspicion, however vague? Is there not a lingering premonition—a premonition which warns of peril?"

"No, Dad—no!" Arthur shot to his feet. "I don't believe it. I've never believed it. I know, as any sane man would know, that you are neither a vampire nor a murderer. You know it, too; and Cecilia knew it, only she was mad.

"That family rot is dispelled, Father. This is a civilized century. Belief in vampirism is sheer lunacy. Wh-why, it's too absurd even to think about!"

"You have the enthusiasm of youth," said his father, in a rather tired voice. "But have you not heard the legend?"

Arthur stepped back instinctively. He

moistened his lips, for their dryness might crack them. "The—legend?"

He said the word in a curious hush of awed softness, as he had heard his Aunt Cecilia say it many times before.

"That awful legend that you——"

"That I *eat* my children?"

"Oh, God, Father!" Arthur went to his knees as a cry burst through his lips. "Dad, that—that's ghastly! We must forget Cecilia's ravings."

"You are affected, then?" asked Doctor Duryea bitterly.

"Affected? Certainly I'm affected, but only as I should be at such an accusation. Cecilia was mad, I tell you. Those books she showed me years ago, and those folk-tales of vampires and ghouls—they burned into my infantile mind like acid. They haunted me day and night in my youth, and caused me to hate you worse than death itself.

"But in Heaven's name, Father, I've outgrown those things as I have outgrown my clothes. I'm a man now; do you understand that? A man, with a man's sense of logic."

"Yes, I understand." Henry Duryea threw his cigar into the fireplace, and placed a hand on his son's shoulder.

"We shall forget Cecilia," he said. "As I told you in my letter, I have rented a lodge in Maine where we can go to be alone for the rest of the summer. We'll get in some fishing and hiking and perhaps some hunting. But first, Arthur, I must be sure in my own mind that you are sure in yours. I must be sure you won't bar your door against me at night, and sleep with a loaded revolver at your elbow. I must be sure that you're not afraid of going up there alone with me, and dying——"

His voice ended abruptly, as if an age-long dread had taken hold of it. His son's face was waxen, with sweat standing out like pearls on his brow. He said nothing, but his eyes were filled with questions which his lips could not put into words. His own hand touched his father's, and tightened over it.

Henry Duryea drew his hand away.

"I'm sorry," he said, and his eyes looked straight over Arthur's lowered head. "This thing must be thrashed out now. I believe you when you say that you discredit Cecilia's stories, but for a sake greater than sanity I must tell you the truth behind the legend—and believe me, Arthur; there is a truth!"

He climbed to his feet and walked to the window which looked out over the street below. For a moment he gazed into space, silent. Then he turned and looked down at his son.

"You have heard only your aunt's version of the legend, Arthur. Doubtless it was warped into a thing far more hideous than it actually was—if that is possible! Doubtless she spoke to you of the Inquisitorial stake in Carcassonne where one of my ancestors perished. Also she may have mentioned that book, *Vampyrs*, which a former Duryea is supposed to have written. Then certainly she told you about your two younger brothers—my own poor, motherless children—who were sucked bloodless in their cradles. . . ."

Arthur Duryea passed a hand across his aching eyes. Those words, so often repeated by that witch of an aunt, stirred up the same visions which had made his childhood nights sleepless with terror. He could hardly bear to hear them again—and from the very man to whom they were accredited.

"Listen, Arthur," the elder Duryea went on quickly, his voice low with the pain it gave him. "You must know that true basis to your aunt's hatred. You must know of that curse—that curse of vampirism which is supposed to have fol-

lowed the Duryeas through five centuries of French history, but which we can dispel as pure superstition, so often connected with ancient families. But I must tell you that this part of the legend is true:

"Your two young brothers actually died in their cradles, bloodless. And I stood trial in France for their murder, and my name was smirched throughout all of Europe with such an inhuman damnation that it drove your aunt and you to America, and has left me childless, hated, and ostracized from society the world over.

"I must tell you that on that terrible night in Duryea Castle I had been working late on historic volumes of Crespet and Prinn, and on that loathsome tome, *Vampyrs.* I must tell you of the soreness that was in my throat and of the heaviness of the blood which coursed through my veins. . . . And of that *presence,* which was neither man nor animal, but which I knew was some place near me, yet neither within the castle nor outside of it, and which was closer to me than my heart and more terrible to me than the touch of the grave. . . .

"I was at the desk in my library, my head swimming in a delirium which left me senseless until dawn. There were nightmares that frightened me—frightened *me,* Arthur, a grown man who had dissected countless cadavers in morgues and medical schools. I know that my tongue was swollen in my mouth and that brine moistened my lips, and that a rottenness pervaded my body like a fever.

"I can make no recollection of sanity or of consciousness. That night remains vivid, unforgettable, yet somehow completely in shadows. When I had fallen asleep—if in God's name it *was* sleep—I was slumped across my desk. But when I awoke in the morning I was lying face down on my couch. So you see, Arthur, I *had* moved during that night, *and I had never known it!*

"What I'd done and where I'd gone during those dark hours will always remain an impenetrable mystery. But I do know this. On the morrow I was torn from my sleep by the shrieks of maids and butlers, and by that mad wailing of your aunt. I stumbled through the open door of my study, and in the nursery I saw those two babies there—lifeless, white and dry like mummies, and with twin holes in their necks that were caked black with their own blood. . . .

"Oh, I don't blame you for your incredulousness, Arthur. I cannot believe it yet myself, nor shall I ever believe it. The belief of it would drive me to suicide; and still the doubting of it drives me mad with horror.

"All of France was doubtful, and even the savants who defended my name at the trial found that they could not explain it nor disbelieve it. The case was quieted by the Republic, for it might have shaken science to its very foundation and split the pedestals of religion and logic. I was released from the charge of murder; but the actual murder has hung about me like a stench.

"The coroners who examined those tiny cadavers found them both dry of all their blood, but could find no blood on the floor of the nursery nor in the cradles. Something from hell stalked the halls of Duryea that night—and I should blow my brains out if I dared to think deeply of who that was. You, too, my son, would have been dead and bloodless if you hadn't been sleeping in a separate room with your door barred on the inside.

"You were a timid child, Arthur. You were only seven years old, but you were filled with the folk-lore of those mad Lombards and the decadent poetry of

your aunt. On that same night, while I was some place between heaven and hell, you, also, heard the padded footsteps on the stone corridor and heard the tugging at your door handle, for in the morning you complained of a chill and of terrible nightmares which frightened you in your sleep. . . . I only thank God that your door was barred!"

HENRY DURYEA's voice choked into a sob which brought the stinging tears back into his eyes. He paused to wipe his face, and to dig his fingers into his palm.

"You understand, Arthur, that for twenty years, under my sworn oath at the Palace of Justice, I could neither see you nor write to you. Twenty years, my son, while all of that time you had grown to hate me and to spit at my name. Not until your aunt's death have you called yourself a Duryea. . . . And now you come to me at my bidding, and say you love me as a son should love his father.

"Perhaps it is God's forgiveness for everything. Now, at last, we shall be together, and that terrible, unexplainable past will be buried for ever. . . ."

He put his handkerchief back into his pocket and walked slowly to his son. He dropped to one knee, and his hands gripped Arthur's arms.

"My son, I can say no more to you. I have told you the truth as I alone know it. I may be, by all accounts, some ghoulish creation of Satan on earth. I may be a child-killer, a vampire, some morbidly diseased specimen of *vrykolakas* —things which science cannot explain.

"Perhaps the dreaded legend of the Duryeas is true. Autiel Duryea was convicted of murdering his brother in that same monstrous fashion in the year 1576, and he died in flames at the stake. François Duryea, in 1802, blew his head apart with a blunderbuss on the morning after his youngest son was found dead, apparently from anemia. And there are others, of whom I cannot bear to speak, that would chill your soul if you were to hear them.

"So you see, Arthur, there is a hellish tradition behind our family. There is a heritage which no sane God would ever have allowed. The future of the Duryeas lies in you, for you are the last of the race. I pray with all of my heart that providence will permit you to live your full share of years, and to leave other Duryeas behind you. And so if ever again I feel that presence as I did in Duryea Castle, I am going to die as François Duryea died, over a hundred years ago. . . ."

He stood up, and his son stood up at his side.

"If you are willing to forget, Arthur, we shall go up to that lodge in Maine. There is a life we've never known awaiting us. We must find that life, and we must find the happiness which a curious fate snatched from us on those Lombard sourlands, twenty years ago. . . ."

2

HENRY DURYEA's tall stature, coupled with a slenderness of frame and a sleekness of muscle, gave him an appearance that was unusually *gaunt*. His son couldn't help but think of that word as he sat on the rustic porch of the lodge, watching his father sunning himself at the lake's edge.

Henry Duryea had a kindliness in his face, at times an almost sublime kindliness which great prophets often possess. But when his face was partly in shadows, particularly about his brow, there was a frightening tone which came into his features; for it was a tone of farness, of mysticism and conjuration. Somehow, in

the late evenings, he assumed the unapproachable mantle of a dreamer and sat silently before the fire, his mind ever off in unknown places.

In that little lodge there was no electricity, and the glow of the oil lamps played curious tricks with the human expression which frequently resulted in something unhuman. It may have been the dusk of night, the flickering of the lamps, but Arthur Duryea had certainly noticed how his father's eyes had sunken further into his head, and how his cheeks were tighter, and the outline of his teeth pressed into the skin about his lips.

It was nearing sundown on the second day of their stay at Timber Lake. Six miles away the dirt road wound on toward Houtlon, near the Canadian border. So it was lonely there, on a solitary little lake hemmed in closely with dark evergreens and a sky which drooped low over dusty-summited mountains.

Within the lodge was a homy fireplace, and a glossy elk's-head which peered out above the mantel. There were guns and fishing-tackle on the walls, shelves of reliable American fiction—Mark Twain, Melville, Stockton, and a well-worn edition of Bret Harte.

A fully supplied kitchen and a wood stove furnished them with hearty meals which were welcome after a whole day's tramp in the woods. On that evening Henry Duryea prepared a select French stew out of every available vegetable, and a can of soup. They ate well, then stretched out before the fire for a smoke. They were outlining a trip to the Orient together, when the back door blew open with a terrific bang, and a wind swept into the lodge with a coldness which chilled them both.

"A storm," Henry Duryea said, rising to his feet. "Sometimes they have them up here, and they're pretty bad. The roof might leak over your bedroom. Perhaps you'd like to sleep down here with me." His fingers strayed playfully over his son's head as he went out into the kitchen to bar the swinging door.

Arthur's room was upstairs, next to a spare room filled with extra furniture. He'd chosen it because he liked the altitude, and because the only other bedroom was occupied. . . .

He went upstairs swiftly and silently. His roof didn't leak; it was absurd even to think it might. It had been his father again, suggesting that they sleep together. He had done it before, in a jesting, whispering way—as if to challenge them both if they *dared* to sleep together.

Arthur came back downstairs dressed in his bath-robe and slippers. He stood on the fifth stair, rubbing a two-day's growth of beard. "I think I'll shave tonight," he said to his father. "May I use your razor?"

Henry Duryea, draped in a black raincoat and with his face haloed in the brim of a rain-hat, looked up from the hall. A frown glided obscurely from his features. "Not at all, son. Sleeping upstairs?"

Arthur nodded, and quickly said, "Are you—going out?"

"Yes, I'm going to tie the boats up tighter. I'm afraid the lake will rough it up a bit."

Duryea jerked back the door and stepped outside. The door slammed shut, and his footsteps sounded on the wood flooring of the porch.

Arthur came slowly down the remaining steps. He saw his father's figure pass across the dark rectangle of a window, saw the flash of lightning that suddenly printed his grim silhouette against the glass.

He sighed deeply, a sigh which burned in his throat; for his throat was sore

and aching. Then he went into the bedroom, found the razor lying in plain view on a birch table-top.

As he reached for it, his glance fell upon his father's open Gladstone bag which rested at the foot of the bed. There was a book resting there, half hidden by a gray flannel shirt. It was a narrow, yellow-bound book, oddly out of place.

Frowning, he bent down and lifted it from the bag. It was surprizingly heavy in his hands, and he noticed a faintly sickening odor of decay which drifted from it like a perfume. The title of the volume had been thumbed away into an indecipherable blur of gold letters. But pasted across the front cover was a white strip of paper, on which was typewritten the word—INFANTIPHAGI.

He flipped back the cover and ran his eyes over the title-page. The book was printed in French—an early French—yet to him wholly comprehensible. The publication date was 1580, in Caen.

Breathlessly he turned back a second page, saw a chapter headed, *Vampires.*

He slumped to one elbow across the bed. His eyes were four inches from those mildewed pages, his nostrils reeked with the stench of them.

He skipped long paragraphs of pedantic jargon on theology, he scanned brief accounts of strange, blood-eating monsters, *vrykolakes,* and leprechauns. He read of Jeanne d'Arc, of Ludvig Prinn, and muttered aloud the Latin snatches from *Episcopi.*

He passed pages in quick succession, his fingers shaking with the fear of it and his eyes hanging heavily in their sockets. He saw vague reference to "Enoch," and saw the terrible drawings by an ancient Dominican of Rome. . . .

Paragraph after paragraph he read: the horror-striking testimony of Nider's *Ant-Hill,* the testimony of people who died shrieking at the stake; the recitals of grave-tenders, of jurists and hangmen. Then unexpectedly, among all of this munimental vestige, there appeared before his eyes the name of—*Autiel Duryea;* and he stopped reading as though invisibly struck.

THUNDER clapped near the lodge and rattled the window-panes. The deep rolling of bursting clouds echoed over the valley. But he heard none of it. His eyes were on those two short sentences which his father—someone—had underlined with dark red crayon.

. . . The execution, four years ago, of Autiel Duryea does not end the Duryea controversy. Time alone can decide whether the Demon has claimed that family from its beginning to its end. . . .

Arthur read on about the trial of Autiel Duryea before Veniti, the Carcassonnean Inquisitor-General; read, with mounting horror, the evidence which had sent that far-gone Duryea to the pillar—the evidence of a bloodless corpse who had been Autiel Duryea's young brother.

Unmindful now of the tremendous storm which had centered over Timber Lake, unheeding the clatter of windows and the swish of pines on the roof—even of his father who worked down at the lake's edge in a drenching rain—Arthur fastened his glance to the blurred print of those pages, sinking deeper and deeper into the garbled legends of a dark age. . . .

On the last page of the chapter he again saw the name of his ancestor, Autiel Duryea. He traced a shaking finger over the narrow lines of words, and when he finished reading them he rolled sideways on the bed, and from his lips came a sobbing, mumbling prayer.

"God, oh God in Heaven protect me. . . ."

For he had read:

As in the case of Autiel Duryea we observe that this specimen of *vrykolakas* preys only upon

the blood in its own family. It possesses none of the characteristics of the undead vampire, being usually a living male person of otherwise normal appearances, unsuspecting its inherent demonism.

But this *vrykolakas* cannot act according to its demoniacal possession unless it is in the presence of a second member of the same family, who acts as a medium between the man and its demon. This medium has none of the traits of the vampire, but it senses the being of this creature (when the metamorphosis is about to occur) by reason of intense pains in the head and throat. Both the vampire and the medium undergo similar reactions, involving nausea, nocturnal visions, and physical disquietude.

When these two outcasts are within a certain distance of each other, the coalescence of inherent demonism is completed, and the vampire is subject to its attacks, demanding blood for its sustenance. No member of the family is safe at these times, for the *vrykolakas*, acting in its true agency on earth, will unerringly seek out the blood. In rare cases, where other victims are unavailable, *the vampire will even take the blood from the very medium which made it possible.*

This vampire is born into certain aged families, and naught but death can destroy it. It is not conscious of its blood-madness, and acts only in a psychic state. The medium, also, is unaware of its terrible rôle; and when these two are together, despite any lapse of years, the fusion of inheritance is so violent that no power known on earth can turn it back.

3

THE lodge door slammed shut with a sudden, interrupting bang. The lock grated, and Henry Duryea's footsteps sounded on the planked floor.

Arthur shook himself from the bed. He had only time to fling that haunting book into the Gladstone bag before he sensed his father standing in the doorway.

"You—you're not shaving, Arthur." Duryea's words, spliced hesitantly, were toneless. He glanced from the table-top to the Gladstone, and to his son. He said nothing for a moment, his glance inscrutable. Then,

"It's blowing up quite a storm outside."

Arthur swallowed the first words which had come into his throat, nodded quickly. "Yes, isn't it? Quite a storm." He met his father's gaze, his face burning. "I—I don't think I'll shave, Dad. My head aches."

Duryea came swiftly into the room and pinned Arthur's arms in his grasp. "What do you mean—your head aches? How? Does your throat——"

"No!" Arthur jerked himself away. He laughed. "It's that French stew of yours! It's hit me in the stomach!" He stepped past his father and started up the stairs.

"The stew?" Duryea pivoted on his heel. "Possibly. I think I feel it myself."

Arthur stopped, his face suddenly white. "You—too?"

The words were hardly audible. Their glances met—clashed like dueling-swords.

For ten seconds neither of them said a word or moved a muscle: Arthur, from the stairs, looking down; his father below, gazing up at him. In Henry Duryea the blood drained slowly from his face and left a purple etching across the bridge of his nose and above his eyes. He looked like a death's-head.

Arthur winced at the sight and twisted his eyes away. He turned to go up the remaining stairs.

"Son!"

He stopped again; his hand tightened on the banister.

"Yes, Dad?"

Duryea put his foot on the first stair. "I want you to lock your door tonight. The wind would keep it banging!"

"Yes," breathed Arthur, and pushed up the stairs to his room.

DOCTOR DURYEA'S hollow footsteps sounded in steady, unhesitant beats across the floor of Timber Lake Lodge. Sometimes they stopped, and the crackling hiss of a sulfur match took their

place, then perhaps a distended sigh, and, again, footsteps. . . .

Arthur crouched at the open door of his room. His head was cocked for those noises from below. In his hands was a double-barrel shotgun of violent gage.

. . . thud . . . thud . . . thud . . .

Then a pause, the clinking of a glass and the gurgling of liquid. The sigh, the tread of his feet over the floor. . . .

"He's thirsty," Arthur thought—*Thirsty!*

Outside, the storm had grown into fury. Lightning zigzagged between the mountains, filling the valley with weird phosphorescence. Thunder, like drums, rolled incessantly.

Within the lodge the heat of the fireplace piled the atmosphere thick with stagnation. All the doors and windows were locked shut, the oil-lamps glowed weakly—a pale, anemic light.

Henry Duryea walked to the foot of the stairs and stood looking up.

Arthur sensed his movements and ducked back into his room, the gun gripped in his shaking fingers.

Then Henry Duryea's footstep sounded on the first stair.

Arthur slumped to one knee. He buckled a fist against his teeth as a prayer tumbled through them.

Duryea climbed a second step . . . and another . . . and still one more. On the fourth stair he stopped.

"Arthur!" His voice cut into the silence like the crack of a whip. "Arthur! Will you come down here?"

"Yes, Dad." Bedraggled, his body hanging like cloth, young Duryea took five steps to the landing.

"We can't be zanies!" cried Henry Duryea. "My soul is sick with dread. Tomorrow we're going back to New York. I'm going to get the first boat to open sea. . . . Please come down here." He turned about and descended the stairs to his room.

Arthur choked back the words which had lumped in his mouth. Half dazed, he followed. . . .

In the bedroom he saw his father stretched face-up along the bed. He saw a pile of rope at his father's feet.

"Tie me to the bedposts, Arthur," came the command. "Tie both my hands and both my feet.

Arthur stood gaping.

"Do as I tell you!"

"Dad, what hor——"

"Don't be a fool! You read that book! You know what relation you are to me! I'd always hoped it was Cecilia, but now I know it's you. I should have known it on that night twenty years ago when you complained of a headache and nightmares. . . . Quickly, my head rocks with pain. *Tie me!*"

Speechless, his own pain piercing him with agony, Arthur fell to that grisly task. Both hands he tied—and both feet . . . tied them so firmly to the iron posts that his father could not lift himself an inch off the bed.

Then he blew out the lamps, and without a further glance at that Prometheus, he reascended the stairs to his room, and slammed and locked his door behind him.

He looked once at the breech of his gun, and set it against a chair by his bed. He flung off his robe and slippers, and within five minutes he was senseless in slumber.

4

He slept late, and when he awakened his muscles were as stiff as boards, and the lingering visions of a nightmare clung before his eyes. He pushed his way out of bed, stood dazedly on the floor.

A dull, numbing cruciation circulated through his head. He felt bloated . . . coarse and running with internal mucus. His mouth was dry, his gums sore and stinging.

He tightened his hands as he lunged for the door. "Dad," he cried, and he heard his voice breaking in his throat.

Sunlight filtered through the window at the top of the stairs. The air was hot and dry, and carried in it a mild odor of decay.

Arthur suddenly drew back at that odor—drew back with a gasp of awful fear. For he recognized it—that stench, the heaviness of his blood, the rawness of his tongue and gums. . . . Age-long it seemed, yet rising like a spirit in his memory. All of these things he had known and felt before.

He leaned against the banister, and half slid, half stumbled down the stairs. . . .

His father had died during the night. He lay like a waxen figure tied to his bed, his face done up in knots.

Arthur stood dumbly at the foot of the bed for only a few seconds; then he went back upstairs to his room.

Almost immediately he emptied both barrels of the shotgun into his head.

THE tragedy at Timber Lake was discovered accidentally three days later. A party of fishermen, upon finding the two bodies, notified state authorities, and an investigation was directly under way.

Arthur Duryea had undoubtedly met death at his own hands. The condition of his wounds, and the manner with which he held the lethal weapon, at once foreclosed the suspicion of any foul play.

But the death of Doctor Henry Duryea confronted the police with an inexplicable mystery; for his trussed-up body, unscathed except for two jagged holes over the jugular vein, *had been drained of all its blood.*

The autopsy protocol of Henry Duryea laid death to "undetermined causes," and it was not until the yellow tabloids commenced an investigation into the Duryea family history that the incredible and fantastic explanations were offered to the public.

Obviously such talk was held in popular contempt; yet in view of the controversial war which followed, the authorities considered it expedient to consign both Duryeas to the crematory. . . .

"The priestess led the rigid little creature forward under the fabulous tree."

The Tree of Life

By C. L. MOORE

A gripping tale of the planet Mars and the terrible monstrosity that called its victims to it from afar—a tale of Northwest Smith

OVER time-ruined Illar the searching planes swooped and circled. Northwest Smith, peering up at them with a steel-pale stare from the shelter of a half-collapsed temple, thought of vultures wheeling above carrion. All day long now they had been raking these ruins for him. Presently, he knew, thirst would begin to parch his throat and hunger to gnaw at him. There was neither food nor water in these ancient Martian ruins, and he knew

that it could be only a matter of time before the urgencies of his own body would drive him out to signal those wheeling Patrol ships and trade his hard-won liberty for food and drink. He crouched lower under the shadow of the temple arch and cursed the accuracy of the Patrol gunner whose flame-blast had caught his dodging ship just at the edge of Illar's ruins.

Presently it occurred to him that in most Martian temples of the ancient days an ornamental well had stood in the outer court for the benefit of wayfarers. Of course all water in it would be a million years dry now, but for lack of anything better to do he rose from his seat at the edge of the collapsed central dome and made his cautious way by still intact corridors toward the front of the temple. He paused in a tangle of wreckage at the courtyard's edge and looked out across the sun-drenched expanse of pavement toward that ornate well that once had served travelers who passed by here in the days when Mars was a green planet.

It was an unusually elaborate well, and amazingly well preserved. Its rim had been inlaid with a mosaic pattern whose symbolism must once have borne deep meaning, and above it in a great fan of time-defying bronze an elaborate grille-work portrayed the inevitable tree-of-life pattern which so often appears in the symbolism of the three worlds. Smith looked at it a bit incredulously from his shelter, it was so miraculously preserved amidst all this chaos of broken stone, casting a delicate tracery of shadow on the sunny pavement as perfectly as it must have done a million years ago when dusty travelers paused here to drink. He could picture them filing in at noontime through the great gates that——

The vision vanished abruptly as his questing eyes made the circle of the ruined walls. There had been no gate. He could not find a trace of it anywhere around the outer wall of the court. The only entrance here, as nearly as he could tell from the foundations that remained, had been the door in whose ruins he now stood. Queer. This must have been a private court, then, its great grille-crowned well reserved for the use of the priests. Or wait—had there not been a priest-king Illar after whom the city was named? A wizard-king, so legend said, who ruled temple as well as palace with an iron hand. This elaborately patterned well, of material royal enough to withstand the weight of ages, might well have been sacrosanct for the use of that long-dead monarch. It might——

Across the sun-bright pavement swept the shadow of a plant. Smith dodged back into deeper hiding while the ship circled low over the courtyard. And it was then, as he crouched against a crumbled wall and waited, motionless, for the danger to pass, that he became aware for the first time of a sound that startled him so he could scarcely credit his ears—a recurrent sound, choked and sorrowful—the sound of a woman sobbing.

The incongruity of it made him forgetful for a moment of the peril hovering overhead in the sun-hot outdoors. The dimness of the temple ruins became a living and vital place for that moment, throbbing with the sound of tears. He looked about half in incredulity, wondering if hunger and thirst were playing tricks on him already, or if these broken halls might be haunted by a million-years-old sorrow that wept along the corridors to drive its hearers mad. There were tales of such haunters in some of Mars' older ruins. The hair prickled faintly at the back of his neck as he laid a hand on the butt of his force-gun and commenced

a cautious prowl toward the source of the muffled noise.

Presently he caught a flash of white, luminous in the gloom of these ruined walls, and went forward with soundless steps, eyes narrowed in the effort to make out what manner of creature this might be that wept alone in time-forgotten ruins. It was a woman. Or it had the dim outlines of a woman, huddled against an angle of fallen walls and veiled in a fabulous shower of long dark hair. But there was something uncannily odd about her. He could not focus his pale stare upon her outlines. She was scarcely more than a luminous blot of whiteness in the gloom, shimmering with a look of unreality which the sound of her sobs denied.

BEFORE he could make up his mind just what to do, something must have warned the weeping girl that she was no longer alone, for the sound of her tears checked suddenly and she lifted her head, turning to him a face no more distinguishable than her body's outlines. He made no effort to resolve the blurred features into visibility, for out of that luminous mask burned two eyes that caught his with an almost perceptible impact and gripped them in a stare from which he could not have turned if he would.

They were the most amazing eyes he had ever met, colored like moonstone, milkily translucent, so that they looked almost blind. And that magnetic stare held him motionless. In the instant that she gripped him with that fixed, moonstone look he felt oddly as if a tangible bond were taut between them.

Then she spoke, and he wondered if his mind, after all, had begun to give way in the haunted loneliness of dead Illar; for though the words she spoke fell upon his ears in a gibberish of meaningless sounds, yet in his brain a message formed with a clarity that far transcended the halting communication of words. And her milkily colored eyes bored into his with a fierce intensity.

"I'm lost—I'm lost——" wailed the voice in his brain.

A rush of sudden tears brimmed the compelling eyes, veiling their brilliance. And he was free again with that clouding of the moonstone surfaces. Her voice wailed, but the words were meaningless and no knowledge formed in his brain to match them. Stiffly he stepped back a pace and looked down at her, a feeling of helpless incredulity rising within him. For he still could not focus directly upon the shining whiteness of her, and nothing save those moonstone eyes were clear to him.

The girl sprang to her feet and rose on tiptoe, gripping his shoulders with urgent hands. Again the blind intensity of her eyes took hold of his, with a force almost as tangible as the clutch of her hands; again that stream of intelligence poured into his brain, strongly, pleadingly.

"Please, please take me back! I'm so frightened — I can't find my way — oh, please!"

He blinked down at her, his dazed mind gradually realizing the basic facts of what was happening. Obviously her milky, unseeing eyes held a magnetic power that carried her thoughts to him without the need of a common speech. And they were the eyes of a powerful mind, the outlets from which a stream of fierce energy poured into his brain. Yet the words they conveyed were the words of a terrified and helpless girl. A strong sense of wariness was rising in him as he considered the incongruity of speech and power, both of which were beating upon him more urgently with every breath. The mind of a forceful and

strong-willed woman, carrying the sobs of a frightened girl. There was no sincerity in it.

"Please, please!" cried her impatience in his brain. "Help me! Guide me back!"

"Back where?" he heard his own voice asking.

"The Tree!" wailed that queer speech in his brain, while gibberish was all his ears heard and the moonstone stare transfixed him strongly. "The Tree of Life! Oh, take me back to the shadow of the Tree!"

A vision of the grille-ornamented well leaped into his memory. It was the only tree symbol he could think of just then. But what possible connection could there be between the well and the lost girl—if she was lost? Another wail in that unknown tongue, another anguished shake of his shoulders, brought a sudden resolution into his groping mind. There could be no harm in leading her back to the well, to whose grille she must surely be referring. And strong curiosity was growing in his mind. Much more than met the eye was concealed in this queer incident. And a wild guess had flashed through his mind that perhaps she might have come from some subterranean world into which the well descended. It would explain her luminous pallor, if not her blurriness; and, too, her eyes did not seem to function in the light. There was a much more incredible explanation of her presence, but he was not to know it for a few minutes yet.

"Come along," he said, taking the clutching hands gently from his shoulders. "I'll lead you to the well."

She sighed in a deep gust of relief and dropped her compelling eyes from his, murmuring in that strange, gabbling tongue what must have been thanks. He took her by the hand and turned toward the ruined archway of the door.

Against his fingers her flesh was cool and firm. To the touch she was tangible, but even thus near, his eyes refused to focus upon the cloudy opacity of her body, the dark blur of her streaming hair. Nothing but those burning, blinded eyes were strong enough to pierce the veil that parted them.

She stumbled along at his side over the rough floor of the temple, saying nothing more, panting with eagerness to return to her incomprehensible "tree." How much of that eagerness was assumed Smith still could not be quite sure. When they reached the door he halted her for a moment, scanning the sky for danger. Apparently the ships had finished with this quarter of the city, for he could see two or three of them half a mile away, hovering low over Illar's northern section. He could risk it without much peril. He led the girl cautiously out into the sun-hot court.

She could not have known by sight that they neared the well, but when they were within twenty paces of it she flung up her blurred head suddenly and tugged at his hand. It was she who led him that last stretch which parted the two from the well. In the sun the shadow tracery of the grille's symbolic pattern lay vividly outlined on the ground. The girl gave a little gasp of delight. She dropped his hand and ran forward three short steps, and plunged into the very center of that shadowy pattern on the ground. And what happened then was too incredible to believe.

The pattern ran over her like a garment, curving to the curve of her body in the way all shadows do. But as she stood there striped and laced with the darkness of it, there came a queer shifting in the lines of black tracery, a subtle, inexplicable movement to one side. And with that motion she vanished. It was exactly as if that shifting had moved her out of

one world into another. Stupidly Smith stared at the spot from which she had disappeared.

Then several things happened almost simultaneously. The zoom of a plane broke suddenly into the quiet, a black shadow dipped low over the rooftops, and Smith, too late, realized that he stood defenseless in full view of the searching ships. There was only one way out, and that was too fantastic to put faith in, but he had no time to hesitate. With one leap he plunged full into the midst of the shadow of the tree of life.

Its tracery flowed round him, molding its pattern to his body. And outside the boundaries everything executed a queer little sidewise dip and slipped in the most extraordinary manner, like an optical illusion, into quite another scene. There was no intervention of blankness. It was as if he looked through the bars of a grille upon a picture which without warning slipped sidewise, while between the bars appeared another scene, a curious, dim landscape, gray as if with the twilight of early evening. The air had an oddly thickened look, through which he saw the quiet trees and the flower-spangled grass of the place with a queer, unreal blending, like the landscape in a tapestry, all its outlines blurred.

In the midst of this tapestried twilight the burning whiteness of the girl he had followed blazed like a flame. She had paused a few steps away and stood waiting, apparently quite sure that he would come after. He grinned a little to himself as he realized it, knowing that curiosity must almost certainly have driven him in her wake even if the necessity for shelter had not compelled his following.

She was clearly visible now, in this thickened dimness—visible, and very lovely, and a little unreal. She shone with a burning clarity, the only vivid thing in the whole twilit world. Eyes upon that blazing whiteness, Smith stepped forward, scarcely realizing that he had moved.

Slowly he crossed the dark grass toward her. That grass was soft underfoot, and thick with small, low-blooming flowers of a shining pallor. Botticelli painted such spangled swards for the feet of his angels. Upon it the girl's bare feet gleamed whiter than the blossoms. She wore no garment but the royal mantle of her hair, sweeping about her in a cloak of shining darkness that had a queer, unreal tinge of purple in that low light. It brushed her ankles in its fabulous length. From the hood of it she watched Smith coming toward her, a smile on her pale mouth and a light blazing in the deeps of her moonstone eyes. She was not blind now, nor frightened. She stretched out her hand to him confidently.

"It is my turn now to lead you," she smiled. As before, the words were gibberish, but the penetrating stare of those strange white eyes gave them a meaning in the depths of his brain.

Automatically his hand went out to hers. He was a little dazed, and her eyes were very compelling. Her fingers twined in his and she set off over the flowery grass, pulling him beside her. He did not ask where they were going. Lost in the dreamy spell of the still, gray, enchanted place, he felt no need for words. He was beginning to see more clearly in the odd, blurring twilight that ran the outlines of things together in that queer, tapestried manner. And he puzzled in a futile, muddled way as he went on over what sort of land he had come into. Overhead was darkness, paling into twilight near the ground, so that when he looked up he was staring into bottomless deeps of starless night.

Trees and flowering shrubs and the flower-starred grass stretched emptily

about them in the thick, confusing gloom of the place. He could see only a little distance through that dim air. It was as if they walked a strip of tapestried twilight in some unlighted dream. And the girl, with her lovely, luminous body and richly colored robe of hair was like a woman in a tapestry too, unreal and magical.

After a while, when he had become a little adjusted to the queerness of the whole scene, he began to notice furtive movements in the shrubs and trees they passed. Things flickered too swiftly for him to catch their outlines, but from the tail of his eye he was aware of motion, and somehow of eyes that watched. That sensation was a familiar one to him, and he kept an uneasy gaze on those shiftings in the shrubbery as they went on. Presently he caught a watcher in full view between bush and tree, and saw that it was a man, a little, furtive, dark-skinned man who dodged hastily back into cover again before Smith's eyes could do more than take in the fact of his existence.

After that he knew what to expect and could make them out more easily: little, darting people with big eyes that shone with a queer, sorrowful darkness from their small, frightened faces as they scuttled through the bushes, dodging always just out of plain sight among the leaves. He could hear the soft rustle of their passage, and once or twice when they passed near a clump of shrubbery he thought he caught the echo of little whispering calls, gentle as the rustle of leaves and somehow full of a strange warning note so clear that he caught it even amid the murmur of their speech. Warning calls, and little furtive hiders in the leaves, and a landscape of tapestried blurring carpeted with Botticelli flower-strewn sward. It was all a dream. He felt quite sure of that.

It was a long while before curiosity awakened in him sufficiently to make him break the stillness. But at last he asked dreamily,

"Where are we going?"

The girl seemed to understand that without the necessity of the bond her hypnotic eyes made, for she turned and caught his eyes in a white stare and answered,

"To Thag. Thag desires you."

"What is Thag?"

In answer to that she launched without preliminary upon a little singsong monolog of explanation whose stereotyped formula made him faintly uneasy with the thought that it must have been made very often to attain the status of a set speech; made to many men, perhaps, whom Thag had desired. And what became of them afterward? he wondered. But the girl was speaking.

"Many ages ago there dwelt in Illar the great King Illar for whom the city was named. He was a magician of mighty power, but not mighty enough to fulfill all his ambitions. So by his arts he called up out of darkness the being known as Thag, and with him struck a bargain. By that bargain Thag was to give of his limitless power, serving Illar all the days of Illar's life, and in return the king was to create a land for Thag's dwelling-place and people it with slaves and furnish a priestess to tend Thag's needs. This is that land. I am that priestess, the latest of a long line of women born to serve Thag. The tree-people are his—his lesser servants.

"I have spoken softly so that the tree-people do not hear, for to them Thag is the center and focus of creation, the end and beginning of all life. But to you I have told the truth."

"But what does Thag want of me?"

"It is not for Thag's servants to question Thag."

"Then what becomes, afterward, of the men Thag desires?" he pursued.

"You must ask Thag that."

She turned her eyes away as she spoke, snapping the mental bond that had flowed between them with a suddenness that left Smith dizzy. He went on at her side more slowly, pulling back a little on the tug of her fingers. By degrees the sense of dreaminess was fading, and alarm began to stir in the deeps of his mind. After all, there was no reason why he need let this blank-eyed priestess lead him up to the very maw of her god. She had lured him into this land by what he knew now to have been a trick; might she not have worse tricks than that in store for him?

She held him, after all, by nothing stronger than the clasp of her fingers, if he could keep his eyes turned from hers. Therein lay her real power, but he could fight it if he chose. And he began to hear more clearly than ever the queer note of warning in the rustling whispers of the tree-folk who still fluttered in and out of sight among the leaves. The twilight place had taken on menace and evil.

Suddenly he made up his mind. He stopped, breaking the clasp of the girl's hand.

"I'm not going," he said.

She swung round in a sweep of richly tinted hair, words jetting from her in a gush of incoherence. But he dared not meet her eyes, and they conveyed no meaning to him. Resolutely he turned away, ignoring her voice, and set out to retrace the way they had come. She called after him once, in a high, clear voice that somehow held a note as warning as that in the rustling voices of the tree-people, but he kept on doggedly, not looking back. She laughed then, sweetly and scornfully, a laugh that echoed uneasily in his mind long after the sound of it had died upon the twilit air.

After a while he glanced back over one shoulder, half expecting to see the luminous dazzle of her body still glowing in the dim glade where he had left her; but the blurred tapestry-landscape was quite empty.

He went on in the midst of a silence so deep it hurt his ears, and in a solitude unhaunted even by the shy presences of the tree-folk. They had vanished with the fire-bright girl, and the whole twilight land was empty save for himself. He plodded on across the dark grass, crushing the upturned flower-faces under his boots and asking himself wearily if he could be mad. There seemed little other explanation for this hushed and tapestried solitude that had swallowed him up. In that thunderous quiet, in that deathly solitude, he went on.

When he had walked for what seemed to him much longer than it should have taken to reach his starting-point, and still no sign of an exit appeared, he began to wonder if there were any way out of the gray land of Thag. For the first time he realized that he had come through no tangible gateway. He had only stepped out of a shadow, and—now that he thought of it—there were no shadows here. The grayness swallowed everything up, leaving the landscape oddly flat, like a badly drawn picture. He looked about helplessly, quite lost now and not sure in what direction he should be facing, for there was nothing here by which to know directions. The trees and shrubs and the starry grass still stretched about him, uncertainly outlined in that changeless dusk. They seemed to go on for ever.

But he plodded ahead, unwilling to stop because of a queer tension in the air, somehow as if all the blurred trees and shrubs were waiting in breathless anticipation, centering upon his stumbling figure. But all trace of animate life had van-

ished with the disappearance of the priestess' white-glowing figure. Head down, paying little heed to where he was going, he went on over the flowery sward.

An odd sense of voids about him startled Smith at last out of his lethargic plodding. He lifted his head. He stood just at the edge of a line of trees, dim and indistinct in the unchanging twilight. Beyond them—he came to himself with a jerk and stared incredulously. Beyond them the grass ran down to nothingness, merging by imperceptible degrees into a streaked and arching void—not the sort of emptiness into which a material body could fall, but a solid *nothing*, curving up toward the dark zenith as the inside of a sphere curves. No physical thing could have entered there. It was too utterly void, an inviolable emptiness which no force could invade.

He stared up along the inward arch of that curving, impassable wall. Here, then, was the edge of the queer land Illar had wrested out of space itself. This arch must be the curving of solid space which had been bent awry to enclose the magical land. There was no escape this way. He could not even bring himself to approach any nearer to that streaked and arching blank. He could not have said why, but it woke in him an inner disquiet so strong that after a moment's staring he turned his eyes away.

Presently he shrugged and set off along the inside of the line of trees which parted him from the space-wall. Perhaps there might be a break somewhere. It was a forlorn hope, but the best that offered. Wearily he stumbled on over the flowery grass.

How long he had gone on along that almost imperceptibly curving line of border he could not have said, but after a timeless interval of gray solitude he gradually became aware that a tiny rustling and whispering among the leaves had been growing louder by degrees for some time. He looked up. In and out among the trees which bordered that solid wall of nothingness little, indistinguishable figures were flitting. The tree-men had returned. Queerly grateful for their presence, he went on a bit more cheerfully, paying no heed to their timid dartings to and fro, for Smith was wise in the ways of wild life.

Presently, when they saw how little heed he paid them, they began to grow bolder, their whispers louder. And among those rustling voices he thought he was beginning to catch threads of familiarity. Now and again a word reached his ears that he seemed to recognize, lost amidst the gibberish of their speech. He kept his head down and his hands quiet, plodding along with a cunning stillness that began to bear results.

From the corner of his eye he could see that a little dark tree-man had darted out from cover and paused midway between bush and tree to inspect the queer, tall stranger. Nothing happened to this daring venturer, and soon another risked a pause in the open to stare at the quiet walker among the trees. In a little while a small crowd of the tree-people was moving slowly parallel with his course, staring with all the avid curiosity of wild things at Smith's plodding figure. And among them the rustling whispers grew louder.

Presently the ground dipped down into a little hollow ringed with trees. It was a bit darker here than it had been on the higher level, and as he went down the slope of its side he saw that among the underbrush which filled it were cunningly hidden huts twined together out of the living bushes. Obviously the hollow was a tiny village where the tree-folk dwelt.

He was surer of this when they began to grow bolder as he went down into the dimness of the place. The whispers

shrilled a little, and the boldest among his watchers ran almost at his elbow, twittering their queer, broken speech in hushed syllables whose familiarity still bothered him with its haunting echo of words he knew. When he had reached the center of the hollow he became aware that the little folk had spread out in a ring to surround him. Wherever he looked their small, anxious faces and staring eyes confronted him. He grinned to himself and came to a halt, waiting gravely.

None of them seemed quite brave enough to constitute himself spokesman, but among several a hurried whispering broke out in which he caught the words "Thag" and "danger" and "beware." He recognized the meaning of these words without placing in his mind their origins in some tongue he knew. He knit his sun-bleached brows and concentrated harder, striving to wrest from that curious, murmuring whisper some hint of its original root. He had a smattering of more tongues than he could have counted offhand, and it was hard to place these scattered words among any one speech.

But the word "Thag" had a sound like that of the very ancient dryland tongue, which upon Mars is considered at once the oldest and the most uncouth of all the planet's languages. And with that clue to guide him he presently began to catch other syllables which were remotely like syllables from the dryland speech. They were almost unrecognizable, far, far more ancient than the very oldest versions of the tongue he had ever heard repeated, almost primitive in their crudity and simplicity. And for a moment the sheerest awe came over him, as he realized the significance of what he listened to.

The dryland race today is a handful of semi-brutes, degenerate from the ages of past time when they were a mighty people at the apex of an almost forgotten glory. That day is millions of years gone now, too far in the past to have record save in the vaguest folklore. Yet here was a people who spoke the rudiments of that race's tongue as it must have been spoken in the race's dim beginnings, perhaps a million years earlier even that that immemorial time of their triumph. The reeling of millenniums set Smith's mind awhirl with the effort at compassing their span.

There was another connotation in the speaking of that tongue by these timid bush-dwellers, too. It must mean that the forgotten wizard king, Illar, had peopled his sinister, twilight land with the ancestors of today's dryland dwellers. If they shared the same tongue they must share the same lineage. And humanity's remorseless adaptability had done the rest.

It had been no kinder here than in the outside world, where the ancient plainsmen who had roamed Mars' green prairies had dwindled with their dying plains, degenerating at last into a shrunken, leather-skinned bestiality. For here that same race root had declined into these tiny, slinking creatures with their dusky skins and great, staring eyes and their voices that never rose above a whisper. What tragedies must lie behind that gradual degeneration!

All about him the whispers still ran. He was beginning to suspect that through countless ages of hiding and murmuring those voices must have lost the ability to speak aloud. And he wondered with a little inward chill what terror it was which had transformed a free and fearless people into these tiny wild things whispering in the underbrush.

The little anxious voices had shrilled into vehemence now, all of them chattering together in their queer, soft, rustling whispers. Looking back later upon that timeless space he had passed in the

hollow, Smith remembered it as some curious nightmare—dimness and tapestried blurring, and a hush like death over the whole twilight land, and the timid voices whispering, whispering, eloquent with terror and warning.

He groped back among his memories and brought forth a phrase or two remembered from long ago, an archaic rendering of the immemorial tongue they spoke. It was the simplest version he could remember of the complex speech now used, but he knew that to them it must sound fantastically strange. Instinctively he whispered as he spoke it, feeling like an actor in a play as he mouthed the ancient idiom,

"I—I cannot understand. Speak—more slowly——"

A torrent of words greeted this rendering of their tongue. Then there was a great deal of hushing and hissing, and presently two or three between them began laboriously to recite an involved speech, one syllable at a time. Always two or more shared the task. Never in his converse with them did he address anyone directly. Ages of terror had bred all directness out of them.

"Thag," they said. "Thag, the terrible—Thag, the omnipotent—Thag, the unescapable. Beware of Thag."

For a moment Smith stood quiet, grinning down at them despite himself. There must not be too much of intelligence left among this branch of the race, either, for surely such a warning was superfluous. Yet they had mastered their agonies of timidity to give it. All virtue could not yet have been bred out of them, then. They still had kindness and a sort of desperate courage rooted deep in fear.

"What is Thag?" he managed to inquire, voicing the archaic syllables uncertainly. And they must have understood the meaning if not the phraseology, for another spate of whispered tumult burst from the clustering tribe. Then, as before, several took up the task of answering.

"Thag—Thag, the end and the beginning, the center of creation. When Thag breathes the world trembles. The earth was made for Thag's dwelling-place. All things are Thag's. Oh, beware! Beware!"

This much he pieced together out of their diffuse whisperings, catching up the fragments of words he knew and fitting them into the pattern.

"What—what is the danger?" he managed to ask.

"Thag—hungers. Thag must be fed. It is we who—feed—him, but there are times when he desires other food than us. It is then he sends his priestess forth to lure—food—in. Oh, beware of Thag!"

"You mean then, that she—the priestess—brought me in for—food?"

A chorus of grave, murmuring affirmatives.

"Then why did she leave me?"

"There is no escape from Thag. Thag is the center of creation. All things are Thag's. When he calls, you must answer. When he hungers, he will have you. Beware of Thag!"

Smith considered that for a moment in silence. In the main he felt confident that he had understood their warning correctly, and he had little reason to doubt that they knew whereof they spoke. Thag might not be the center of the universe, but if they said he could call a victim from anywhere in the land, Smith was not disposed to doubt it. The priestess' willingness to let him leave her unhindered, yes, even her scornful laughter as he looked back, told the same story. Whatever Thag might be, his power in this land could not be doubted. He made up his mind suddenly what he must do, and turned to the breathlessly waiting little folk.

"Which way—lies Thag?" he asked.

A score of dark, thin arms pointed. Smith turned his head speculatively toward the spot they indicated. In this changeless twilight all sense of direction had long since left him, but he marked the line as well as he could by the formation of the trees, then turned to the little people with a ceremonious farewell rising to his lips.

"My thanks for——" he began, to be interrupted by a chorus of whispering cries of protest. They seemed to sense his intention, and their pleadings were frantic. A panic anxiety for him glowed upon every little terrified face turned up to his, and their eyes were wide with protest and terror. Helplessly he looked down.

"I—I must go," he tried stumblingly to say. "My only chance is to take Thag unawares, before he sends for me."

He could not know if they understood. Their chattering went on undiminished, and they even went so far as to lay tiny hands on him, as if they would prevent him by force from seeking out the terror of their lives.

"No, no, no!" they wailed murmurously. "You do not know what it is you seek! You do not know Thag! Stay here! Beware of Thag!"

A little prickling of unease went down Smith's back as he listened. Thag must be very terrible indeed if even half this alarm had foundation. And to be quite frank with himself, he would greatly have preferred to remain here in the hidden quiet of the hollow, with its illusion of shelter, for as long as he was allowed to stay. But he was not of the stuff that yields very easily to its own terrors, and hope burned strongly in him still. So he squared his broad shoulders and turned resolutely in the direction the tree-folk had indicated.

When they saw that he meant to go, their protests sank to a wail of bitter grieving. With that sound moaning behind him he went up out of the hollow, like a man setting forth to the music of his own dirge. A few of the bravest went with him a little way, flitting through the underbrush and darting from tree to tree in a timidity so deeply ingrained that even when no immediate peril threatened they dared not go openly through the twilight.

Their presence was comforting to Smith as he went on. A futile desire to help the little terror-ridden tribe was rising in him, a useless gratitude for their warning and their friendliness, their genuine grieving at his departure and their odd, paradoxical bravery even in the midst of hereditary terror. But he knew that he could do nothing for them, when he was not at all sure he could even save himself. Something of their panic had communicated itself to him, and he advanced with a sinking at the pit of his stomach. Fear of the unknown is so poignant a thing, feeding on its own terror, that he found his hands beginning to shake a little and his throat going dry as he went on.

The rustling and whispering among the bushes dwindled as his followers one by one dropped away, the bravest staying the longest, but even they failing in courage as Smith advanced steadily in that direction from which all their lives they had been taught to turn their faces. Presently he realized that he was alone once more. He went on more quickly, anxious to come face to face with this horror of the twilight and dispel at least the fearfulness of its mystery.

The silence was like death. Not a breeze stirred the leaves, and the only sound was his own breathing, the heavy thud of his own heart. Somehow he felt sure that he was coming nearer to his

goal. The hush seemed to confirm it. He loosened the force-gun at his thigh.

In that changeless twilight the ground was sloping down once more into a broader hollow. He descended slowly, every sense alert for danger, not knowing if Thag was beast or human or elemental, visible or invisible. The trees were beginning to thin. He knew that he had almost reached his goal.

He paused at the edge of the last line of trees. A clearing spread out before him at the bottom of the hollow, quiet in the dim, translucent air. He could focus directly upon no outlines anywhere, for the tapestried blurring of the place. But when he saw what stood in the very center of the clearing he stopped dead-still, like one turned to stone, and a shock of utter cold went chilling through him. Yet he could not have said why.

For in the clearing's center stood the Tree of Life. He had met the symbol too often in patterns and designs not to recognize it, but here that fabulous thing was living, growing, actually springing up from a rooted firmness in the spangled grass as any tree might spring. Yet it could not be real. Its thin brown trunk, of no recognizable substance, smooth and gleaming, mounted in the traditional spiral; its twelve fantastically curving branches arched delicately outward from the central stem. It was bare of leaves. No foliage masked the serpentine brown spiral of the trunk. But at the tip of each symbolic branch flowered a blossom of bloody rose so vivid he could scarcely focus his dazzled eyes upon them.

This tree alone of all objects in the dim land was sharply distinct to the eye—terribly distinct, remorselessly clear. No words can describe the amazing menace that dwelt among its branches. Smith's flesh crept as he stared, yet he could not for all his staring make out why peril was so eloquent there. To all appearances here stood only a fabulous symbol miraculously come to life; yet danger breathed out from it so strongly that Smith felt the hair lifting on his neck as he stared.

It was no ordinary danger. A nameless, choking, paralyzed panic was swelling in his throat as he gazed upon the perilous beauty of the Tree. Somehow the arches and curves of its branches seemed to limn a pattern so dreadful that his heart beat faster as he gazed upon it. But he could not guess why, though somehow the answer was hovering just out of reach of his conscious mind. From that first glimpse of it his instincts shuddered like a shying stallion, yet reason still looked in vain for an answer.

Nor was the Tree merely a vegetable growth. It was alive, terribly, ominously alive. He could not have said how he knew that, for it stood motionless in its empty clearing, not a branch trembling, yet in its immobility more awfully vital than any animate thing. The very sight of it woke in Smith an insane urging to flight, to put worlds between himself and this inexplicably dreadful thing.

Crazy impulses stirred in his brain, coming to insane birth at the calling of the Tree's peril—the desperate need to shut out the sight of that thing that was blasphemy, to put out his own sight rather than gaze longer upon the perilous grace of its branches, to slit his own throat that he might not need to dwell in the same world which housed so frightful a sight as the Tree.

All this was a mad battering in his brain. The strength of him was enough to isolate it in a far corner of his consciousness, where it seethed and shrieked half heeded while he turned the cool control which the spaceways life had taught him to the solution of this urgent question. But even so his hand was moist

and shaking on his gun-butt, and the breath rasped in his dry throat.

Why—he asked himself in a determined groping after steadiness—should the mere sight of a tree, even so fabulous a one as this, rouse that insane panic in the gazer? What peril could dwell invisibly in a tree so frightful that the living horror of it could drive a man mad with the very fact of its unseen presence? He clenched his teeth hard and stared resolutely at that terrible beauty in the clearing, fighting down the sick panic that rose in his throat as his eyes forced themselves to dwell upon the Tree.

Gradually the revulsion subsided. After a nightmare of striving he mustered the strength to force it down far enough to allow reason's entry once more. Sternly holding down that frantic terror under the surface of consciousness, he stared resolutely at the Tree. And he knew that this was Thag.

It could be nothing else, for surely two such dreadful things could not dwell in one land. It must be Thag, and he could understand now the immemorial terror in which the tree-folk held it, but he did not yet grasp in what way it threatened them physically. The inexplicable dreadfulness of it was a menace to the mind's very existence, but surely a rooted tree, however terrible to look at, could wield little actual danger.

As he reasoned, his eyes were seeking restlessly among the branches, searching for the answer to their dreadfulness. After all, this thing wore the aspect of an old pattern, and in that pattern there was nothing dreadful. The tree of life had made up the design upon that well-top in Illar through whose shadow he had entered here, and nothing in that bronze grille-work had roused terror. Then why——? What living menace dwelt invisibly among these branches to twist them into curves of horror?

A fragment of old verse drifted through his mind as he stared in perplexity:

> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

And for the first time the true significance of a "fearful symmetry" broke upon him. Truly a more than human agency must have arched these subtle curves so delicately into dreadfulness, into such an awful beauty that the very sight of it made those atavistic terrors he was so sternly holding down leap in a gibbering terror.

A tremor rippled over the Tree. Smith froze rigid, staring with startled eyes. No breath of wind had stirred through the clearing, but the Tree was moving with a slow, serpentine grace, writhing its branches leisurely in a horrible travesty of voluptuous enjoyment. And upon their tips the blood-red flowers were spreading like cobra's hoods, swelling and stretching their petals out and glowing with a hue so eye-piercingly vivid that it transcended the bounds of color and blazed forth like pure light.

But it was not toward Smith that they stirred. They were arching out from the central trunk toward the far side of the clearing. After a moment Smith tore his eyes away from the indescribably dreadful flexibility of those branches and looked to see the cause of their writhing.

A blaze of luminous white had appeared among the trees across the clearing. The priestess had returned. He watched her pacing slowly toward the Tree, walking with a precise and delicate grace as liquidly lovely as the motion of the Tree. Her fabulous hair swung down about her in a swaying robe that rippled at every step away from the moon-white beauty of her body. Straight toward the Tree she paced, and all the blossoms glowed more vividly at her nearness, the

branches stretching toward her, rippling with eagerness.

Priestess though she was, he could not believe that she was going to come within touch of that Tree the very sight of which roused such a panic instinct of revulsion in every fiber of him. But she did not swerve or slow in her advance. Walking delicately over the flowery grass, arrogantly luminous in the twilight, so that her body was the center and focus of any landscape she walked in, she neared her horribly eager god.

Now she was under the Tree, and its trunk had writhed down over her and she was lifting her arms like a girl to her lover. With a gliding slowness the flame-tipped branches slid round her. In that incredible embrace she stood immobile for a long moment, the Tree arching down with all its curling limbs, the girl straining upward, her head thrown back and the mantle of her hair swinging free of her body as she lifted her face to the quivering blossoms. The branches gathered her closer in their embrace. Now the blossoms arched near, curving down all about her, touching her very gently, twisting their blazing faces toward the focus of her moon-white body. One poised directly above her face, trembled, brushed her mouth lightly. And the Tree's tremor ran unbroken through the body of the girl it clasped.

The incredible dreadfulness of that embrace was suddenly more than Smith could bear. All his terrors, crushed down with so stern a self-control, without warning burst all bounds and rushed over him in a flood of blind revulsion. A whimper choked up in his throat and quite involuntarily he swung round and plunged into the shielding trees, hands to his eyes in a futile effort to blot out the sight of lovely horror behind him whose vividness was burnt upon his very brain.

Heedlessly he blundered through the trees, no thought in his terror-blank mind save the necessity to run, run, run until he could run no more. He had given up all attempt at reason and rationality; he no longer cared why the beauty of the Tree was so dreadful. He only knew that until all space lay between him and its symmetry he must run and run and run.

What brought that frenzied madness to an end he never knew. When sanity returned to him he was lying face down on the flower-spangled sward in a silence so deep that his ears ached with its heaviness. The grass was cool against his cheek. For a moment he fought the back-flow of knowledge into his emptied mind. When it came, the memory of that horror he had fled from, he started up with a wild thing's swiftness and glared around pale-eyed into the unchanging dusk. He was alone. Not even a rustle in the leaves spoke of the tree-folk's presence.

For a moment he stood there alert, wondering what had roused him, wondering what would come next. He was not left long in doubt. The answer was shrilling very, very faintly through that aching quiet, an infinitesimally tiny, unthinkably far-away murmur which yet pierced his ear-drums with the sharpness of tiny needles. Breathless, he strained in listening. Swiftly the sound grew louder. It deepened upon the silence, sharpened and shrilled until the thin blade of it was vibrating in the center of his innermost brain.

And still it grew, swelling louder and louder through the twilight world in cadences that were rounding into a queer sort of music and taking on such an unbearable sweetness that Smith pressed his

hands over his ears in a futile attempt to shut the sound away. He could not. It rang in steadily deepening intensities through every fiber of his being, piercing him with thousands of tiny music-blades that quivered in his very soul with intolerable beauty. And he thought he sensed in the piercing strength of it a vibration of queer, unnamable power far mightier than anything ever generated by man, the dim echo of some cosmic dynamo's hum.

The sound grew sweeter as it strengthened, with a queer, inexplicable sweetness unlike any music he had ever heard before, rounder and fuller and more complete than any melody made up of separate notes. Stronger and stronger he felt the certainty that it was the song of some mighty power, humming and throbbing and deepening through the twilight until the whole dim land was one trembling reservoir of sound that filled his entire consciousness with its throbbing, driving out all other thoughts and realizations, until he was no more than a shell that vibrated in answer to the calling.

For it was a calling. No one could listen to that intolerable sweetness without knowing the necessity to seek its source. Remotely in the back of his mind Smith remembered the tree-folk's warning, "When Thag calls, you must answer." Not consciously did he recall it, for all his consciousness was answering the siren humming in the air, and, scarcely realizing that he moved, he had turned toward the source of that calling, stumbling blindly over the flowery sward with no thought in his music-brimmed mind but the need to answer that lovely, power-vibrant summoning.

Past him as he went on moved other shapes, little and dark-skinned and ecstatic, gripped like himself in the hypnotic melody. The tree-folk had forgotten even their inbred fear at Thag's calling, and walked boldly through the open twilight, lost in the wonder of the song.

Smith went on with the rest, deaf and blind to the land around him, alive to one thing only, that summons from the siren tune. Unrealizingly, he retraced the course of his frenzied flight, past the trees and bushes he had blundered through, down the slope that led to the Tree's hollow, through the thinning of the underbrush to the very edge of the last line of foliage which marked the valley's rim.

By now the calling was so unbearably intense, so intolerably sweet that somehow in its very strength it set free a part of his dazed mind as it passed the limits of audible things and soared into ecstasies which no senses bound. And though it gripped him ever closer in its magic, a sane part of his brain was waking into realization. For the first time alarm came back into his mind, and by slow degrees the world returned about him. He stared stupidly at the grass moving by under his pacing feet. He lifted a dragging head and saw that the trees no longer rose about him, that a twilit clearing stretched away on all sides toward the forest rim which circled it, that the music was singing from some source so near that—that——

The Tree! Terror leaped within him like a wild thing. The Tree, quivering with unbearable clarity in the thick, dim air, writhed above him, blossoms blazing with bloody radiance and every branch vibrant and undulant to the tune of that unholy song. Then he was aware of the lovely, luminous whiteness of the priestess swaying forward under the swaying limbs, her hair rippling back from the loveliness of her as she moved.

Choked and frenzied with unreasoning terror, he mustered every effort that was

in him to turn, to run again like a madman out of that dreadful hollow, to hide himself under the weight of all space from the menace of the Tree. And all the while he fought, all the while panic drummed like mad in his brain, his relentless body plodded on straight toward the hideous loveliness of that siren singer towering above him. From the first he had felt subconsciously that it was Thag who called, and now, in the very center of that ocean of vibrant power, he knew. Gripped in the music's magic, he went on.

All over the clearing other hypnotized victims were advancing slowly, with mechanical steps and wide, frantic eyes as the tree-folk came helplessly to their god's calling. He watched a group of little, dusky sacrifices pace step by step nearer to the Tree's vibrant branches. The priestess came forward to meet them with outstretched arms. He saw her take the foremost gently by the hands. Unbelieving, hypnotized with horrified incredulity, he watched her lead the rigid little creature forward under the fabulous Tree whose limbs yearned downward like hungry snakes, the great flowers glowing with avid color.

He saw the branches twist out and lengthen toward the sacrifice, quivering with eagerness. Then with a tiger's leap they darted, and the victim was swept out of the priestess' guiding hands up into the branches that darted round like tangled snakes in a clot that hid him for an instant from view. Smith heard a high, shuddering wail ripple out from that knot of struggling branches, a dreadful cry that held such an infinity of purest horror and understanding that he could not but believe that Thag's victims in the moment of their doom must learn the secret of his horror. After that one frightful cry came silence. In an instant the limbs fell apart again from emptiness. The little savage had melted like smoke among their writhing, too quickly to have been devoured, more as if he had been snatched into another dimension in the instant the hungry limbs hid him. Flame-tipped, avid, they were dipping now toward another victim as the priestess paced serenely forward.

And still Smith's rebellious feet were carrying him on, nearer and nearer the writhing peril that towered over his head. The music shrilled like pain. Now he was so close that he could see the hungry flower-mouths in terrible detail as they faced round toward him. The limbs quivered and poised like cobras, reached out with a snakish lengthening, down inexorably toward his shuddering helplessness. The priestess was turning her calm white face toward his.

Those arcs and changing curves of the branches as they neared were sketching lines of pure horror whose meaning he still could not understand, save that they deepened in dreadfulness as he neared. For the last time that urgent wonder burned up in his mind why—*why* so simple a thing as this fabulous Tree should be infused with an indwelling terror strong enough to send his innermost soul frantic with revulsion. For the last time—because in that trembling instant as he waited for their touch, as the music brimmed up with unbearable, brain-wrenching intensity, in that one last moment before the flower-mouths seized him—he saw. He understood.

With eyes opened at last by the instant's ultimate horror, he saw the real Thag. Dimly he knew that until now the thing had been so frightful that his eyes had refused to register its existence, his brain to acknowledge the possibility of such dreadfulness. It had literally been too terrible to see, though his instinct knew the presence of infinite horror. But

now, in the grip of that mad, hypnotic song, in the instant before unbearable terror enfolded him, his eyes opened to full sight, and he saw.

That Tree was only Thag's outline, sketched three-dimensionally upon the twilight. Its dreadfully curving branches had been no more than Thag's barest contours, yet even they had made his very soul sick with intuitive revulsion. But now, seeing the true horror, his mind was too numb to do more than register its presence: Thag, hovering monstrously between earth and heaven, billowing and surging up there in the translucent twilight, tethered to the ground by the Tree's bending stem and reaching ravenously after the hypnotized fodder that his calling brought helpless into his clutches. One by one he snatched them up, one by one absorbed them into the great, unseeable horror of his being. That, then, was the reason why they vanished so instantaneously, sucked into the concealing folds of a thing too dreadful for normal eyes to see.

The priestess was pacing forward. Above her the branches arched and leaned. Caught in a timeless paralysis of horror, Smith stared upward into the enormous bulk of Thag while the music hummed intolerably in his shrinking brain—Thag, the monstrous thing from darkness, called up by Illar in those long-forgotten times when Mars was a green planet. Foolishly his brain wandered among the ramifications of what had happened so long ago that time itself had forgotten, refusing to recognize the fate that was upon himself. He knew a tingle of respect for the ages-dead wizard who had dared command a being like this to his services—this vast, blind, hovering thing, ravenous for human flesh, indistinguishable even now save in those terrible outlines that sent panic leaping through him with every motion of the Tree's fearful symmetry.

All this flashed through his dazed mind in the one blinding instant of understanding. Then the priestess' luminous whiteness swam up before his hypnotized stare. Her hands were upon him, gently guiding his mechanical footsteps, very gently leading him forward into—into——

The writhing branches struck downward, straight for his face. And in one flashing leap the moment's infinite horror galvanized him out of his paralysis. Why, he could not have said. It is not given to many men to know the ultimate essentials of all horror, concentrated into one fundamental unit. To most men it would have had that same paralyzing effect up to the very instant of destruction. But in Smith there must have been a bed-rock of subtle violence, an unyielding, inflexible vehemence upon which the structure of his whole life was reared. Few men have it. And when that ultimate intensity of terror struck the basic flint of him, reaching down through mind and soul into the deepest depths of his being, it struck a spark from that inflexible barbarian buried at the roots of him which had force enough to shock him out of his stupor.

In the instant of release his hand swept like an unloosed spring, of its own volition, straight for the butt of his power-gun. He was dragging it free as the Tree's branches snatched him from its priestess' hands. The fire-colored blossoms burnt his flesh as they closed round him, the hot branches gripping like the touch of ravenous fingers. The whole Tree was hot and throbbing with a dreadful travesty of fleshly life as it whipped him aloft into the hovering bulk of incarnate horror above.

In the instantaneous upward leap of the flower-tipped limbs Smith fought like a demon to free his gun-hand from the gripping coils. For the first time Thag knew rebellion in his very clutches, and the ecstasy of that music which had dinned in Smith's ears so strongly that by now it seemed almost silence was swooping down a long arc into wrath, and the branches tightened with hot insistency, lifting the rebellious offering into Thag's monstrous, indescribable bulk.

But even as they rose, Smith was twisting in their clutch to maneuver his hand into a position from which he could blast that undulant tree trunk into nothingness. He knew intuitively the futility of firing up into Thag's imponderable mass. Thag was not of the world he knew; the flame blast might well be harmless to that mighty hoverer in the twilight. But at the Tree's root, where Thag's essential being merged from the imponderable to the material, rooting in earthly soil, he should be vulnerable if he were vulnerable at all. Struggling in the tight, hot coils, breathing the nameless essence of horror, Smith fought to free his hand.

The music that had rung so long in his ears was changing as the branches lifted him higher, losing its melody and merging by swift degrees into a hum of vast and vibrant power that deepened in intensity as the limbs drew him upward into Thag's monstrous bulk, the singing force of a thing mightier than any dynamo ever built. Blinded and dazed by the force thundering through every atom of his body, he twisted his hand in one last, convulsive effort, and fired.

He saw the flame leap in a dazzling gush straight for the trunk below. It struck. He heard the sizzle of annihilated matter. He saw the trunk quiver convulsively from the very roots, and the whole fabulous Tree shook once with an ominous tremor. But before that tremor could shiver up the branches to him the hum of the living dynamo which was closing round his body shrilled up arcs of pure intensity into a thundering silence.

Then without a moment's warning the world exploded. So instantaneously did all this happen that the gun-blast's roar had not yet echoed into silence before a mightier sound than the brain could bear exploded outward from the very center of his own being. Before the awful power of it everything reeled into a shaken oblivion. He felt himself falling. . . .

A QUEER, penetrating light shining upon his closed eyes roused Smith by degrees into wakefulness again. He lifted heavy lids and stared upward into the unwinking eye of Mars' racing nearer moon. He lay there blinking dazedly for a while before enough of memory returned to rouse him. Then he sat up painfully, for every fiber of him ached, and stared round on a scene of the wildest destruction. He lay in the midst of a wide, rough circle which held nothing but powdered stone. About it, rising raggedly in the moving moonlight, the blocks of time-forgotten Illar loomed.

But they were no longer piled one upon another in a rough travesty of the city they once had shaped. Some force mightier than any of man's explosives seemed to have hurled them with such violence from their beds that their very atoms had been disrupted by the force of it, crumbling them into dust. And in the very center of the havoc lay Smith, unhurt.

He stared in bewilderment about the moonlight ruins. In the silence it seemed to him that the very air still quivered in

shocked vibrations. And as he stared he realized that no force save one could have wrought such destruction upon the ancient stones. Nor was there any explosive known to man which would have wrought this strange, pulverizing havoc upon the blocks of Illar. That force had hummed unbearably through the living dynamo of Thag, a force so powerful that space itself had bent to enclose it. Suddenly he realized what must have happened.

Not Illar, but Thag himself had warped the walls of space to enfold the twilit world, and nothing but Thag's living power could have held it so bent to segregate the little, terror-ridden land inviolate.

Then when the Tree's roots parted, Thag's anchorage in the material world failed and in one great gust of unthinkable energy the warped space-walls had ceased to bend. Those arches of solid space had snapped back into their original pattern, hurling the land and all its dwellers into—into—— His mind balked in the effort to picture what must have happened, into what ultimate dimension those denizens must have vanished.

Only himself, enfolded deep in Thag's very essence, the intolerable power of the explosion had not touched. So when the warped space-curve ceased to be, and Thag's hold upon reality failed, he must have been dropped back out of the dissolving folds upon the spot where the Tree had stood in the space-circled world, through that vanished world-floor into the spot he had been snatched from in the instant of the dim land's dissolution. It must have happened after the terrible force of the explosion had spent itself, before Thag dared move even himself through the walls of changing energy into his own far land again.

Smith sighed and lifted a hand to his throbbing head, rising slowly to his feet. What time had elapsed he could not guess, but he must assume that the Patrol still searched for him. Wearily he set out across the circle of havoc toward the nearest shelter which Illar offered. The dust rose in ghostly, moonlit clouds under his feet.

Red Nails

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

One of the strangest stories ever written—the tale of a barbarian adventurer, a woman pirate, and a weird roofed city inhabited by the most peculiar race of men ever spawned

The Story Thus Far

CONAN the Cimmerian, and Valeria, a woman pirate, having deserted from a mercenary army on the Stygian-Darfar border, came, after many days' flight, to a vast forest far to the south. There their horses were slain and devoured by a dragon, which Conan managed to kill with a poisoned spear. In a plain surrounded by the forest, they came upon a fantastic city called Xuchotl, a series of halls and chambers built all under one roof, floored with a lambent red stone and illuminated by means of skylights and green fire-jewels. At first it appeared to be deserted, but later they discovered it to be inhabited by a tribe of mongrel Stygians called Tlazitlans, who were divided into rival clans known as Tecuhltli and Xotalancas.

Valeria saved the life of a Tecuhltli named Techotl, and with him they fled to the castle of Tecuhltli near the western gate of the city, pursued by the Xotalancas, who dwelt by the eastern gate. Tecuhltli was ruled over by Prince Olmec and Princess Tascela, who displayed a sinister interest in Valeria. Olmec told the adventurers that half a century ago a tribe of Tlazitlans had fled southward from the Stygians, and fought their way through the dragon-haunted forest and found the city, then occupied by a degenerate race which had once been powerful magicians. The Tlazitlans had destroyed them and settled in the city, ruled by the brothers Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, and by an evil ancient named Tolkemec.

A quarrel over a woman had split the tribe into three clans, of which that of Tolkemec had been utterly destroyed twelve years before, Tolkemec escaping, supposedly dying, from the dungeon where he was thrown. Fear of the dragons in the forest kept the people imprisoned in the city, while the feud reduced the tribe to a handful on each side.

Red nails driven in an ebon column denoted the number of Xotalancas slain in the feud. Olmec persuaded Conan and Valeria to remain and fight for his clan as mercenaries. They were shown to separate chambers, and Valeria awoke during the night to find Yasala, Tascela's maid, trying to drug her with the black lotus. She tried to make the girl explain her actions, but Yasala, fleeing from her, ran down a stair leading to the catacombs beneath the city, into which old Tolkemec had dragged his broken body twelve years before. Valeria heard her scream down in the darkness, and heard an inhuman, high-pitched tittering. Returning to her chamber she secured her garments and weapons, meaning to urge Conan to join her in flight from the city she had begun to fear. But just as she started for his chamber she heard a sudden clamor of yells and the clash of swords.

The story continues:

5. *Twenty Red Nails*

Two warriors lounged in the guardroom on the floor known as the Tier of the Eagle. Their attitude was casual, though habitually alert. An attack on the great bronze door from without was always a possibility, but for many years no such assault had been attempted on either side.

"The strangers are strong allies," said one. "Olmec will move against the enemy tomorrow, I believe."

He spoke as a soldier in a war might have spoken. In the miniature world of Xuchotl each handful of feudists was an army, and the empty halls between the castles was the country over which they campaigned.

The other meditated for a space.

"Suppose with their aid we destroy Xotalanc," he said. "What then, Xatmec?"

"Why," returned Xatmec, "we will drive red nails for them all. The captives we will burn and flay and quarter."

"But afterward?" pursued the other. "After we have slain them all? Will it

"Even as he shifted, he hurled the knife."

not seem strange, to have no foes to fight? All my life I have fought and hated the Xotalancas. With the feud ended, what is left?"

Xatmec shrugged his shoulders. His thoughts had never gone beyond the destruction of their foes. They could not go beyond that.

Suddenly both men stiffened at a noise outside the door.

"To the door, Xatmec!" hissed the last speaker. "I shall look through the Eye——"

Xatmec, sword in hand, leaned against the bronze door, straining his ear to hear through the metal. His mate looked into the mirror. He started convulsively. Men were clustered thickly outside the door; grim, dark-faced men with swords gripped in their teeth—*and their fingers thrust into their ears.* One who wore a feathered head-dress had a set of pipes which he set to his lips, and even as the Tecuhltli started to shout a warning, the pipes began to skirl.

The cry died in the guard's throat as the thin, weird piping penetrated the metal door and smote on his ears. Xatmec leaned frozen against the door, as if paralyzed in that position. His face was that of a wooden image, his expression one of horrified listening. The other guard, farther removed from the source of the sound, yet sensed the horror of what was taking place, the grisly threat that lay in that demoniac fifing. He felt the weird strains plucking like unseen fingers at the tissues of his brain, filling him with alien emotions and impulses of madness. But with a soul-tearing effort he broke the spell, and shrieked a warning in a voice he did not recognize as his own.

But even as he cried out, the music changed to an unbearable shrilling that was like a knife in the ear-drums. Xatmec screamed in sudden agony, and all the sanity went out of his face like a flame blown out in a wind. Like a madman he ripped loose the chain, tore open the door and rushed out into the hall, sword lifted before his mate could stop him. A dozen blades struck him down, and over his mangled body the Xotalancas surged into the guardroom, with a long-drawn, blood-mad yell that sent the unwonted echoes reverberating.

His brain reeling from the shock of it all, the remaining guard leaped to meet them with goring spear. The horror of the sorcery he had just witnessed was submerged in the stunning realization that the enemy were in Tecuhltli. And as his spearhead ripped through a dark-skinned belly he knew no more, for a swinging sword crushed his skull, even as wild-eyed warriors came pouring in from the chambers behind the guardroom.

It was the yelling of men and the clanging of steel that brought Conan bounding from his couch, wide awake and broadsword in hand. In an instant he had reached the door and flung it open, and was glaring out into the corridor just as Techotl rushed up it, eyes blazing madly.

"The Xotalancas!" he screamed, in a voice hardly human. *"They are within the door!"*

Conan ran down the corridor, even as Valeria emerged from her chamber.

"What the devil is it?" she called.

"Techotl says the Xotalancas are in," he answered hurriedly. "That racket sounds like it."

With the Tecuhltli on their heels they burst into the throneroom and were confronted by a scene beyond the most frantic dream of blood and fury. Twenty men and women, their black hair streaming, and the white skulls gleaming on their breasts, were locked in combat with the people of Tecuhltli. The women

on both sides fought as madly as the men, and already the room and the hall beyond were strewn with corpses.

Olmec, naked but for a breech-clout, was fighting before his throne, and as the adventurers entered, Tascela ran from an inner chamber with a sword in her hand.

Xatmec and his mate were dead, so there was none to tell the Tecuhltli how their foes had found their way into their citadel. Nor was there any to say what had prompted that mad attempt. But the losses of the Xotalancas had been greater, their position more desperate, than the Tecuhltli had known. The maiming of their scaly ally, the destruction of the Burning Skull, and the news, gasped by a dying man, that mysterious white-skin allies had joined their enemies, had driven them to the frenzy of desperation and the wild determination to die dealing death to their ancient foes.

The Tecuhltli, recovering from the first stunning shock of the surprize that had swept them back into the throneroom and littered the floor with their corpses, fought back with an equally desperate fury, while the door-guards from the lower floors came racing to hurl themselves into the fray. It was the death-fight of rabid wolves, blind, panting, merciless. Back and forth it surged, from door to dais, blades whickering and striking into flesh, blood spurting, feet stamping the crimson floor where redder pools were forming. Ivory tables crashed over, seats were splintered, velvet hangings torn down were stained red. It was the bloody climax of a bloody half-century, and every man there sensed it.

But the conclusion was inevitable. The Tecuhltli outnumbered the invaders almost two to one, and they were heartened by that fact and by the entrance into the mêlée of their light-skinned allies.

These crashed into the fray with the devastating effect of a hurricane plowing through a grove of saplings. In sheer strength no three Tlazitlans were a match for Conan, and in spite of his weight he was quicker on his feet than any of them. He moved through the whirling, eddying mass with the surety and destructiveness of a gray wolf amidst a pack of alley curs, and he strode over a wake of crumpled figures.

Valeria fought beside him, her lips smiling and her eyes blazing. She was stronger than the average man, and far quicker and more ferocious. Her sword was like a living thing in her hand. Where Conan beat down opposition by the sheer weight and power of his blows, breaking spears, splitting skulls and cleaving bosoms to the breastbone, Valeria brought into action a finesse of swordplay that dazzled and bewildered her antagonists before it slew them. Again and again a warrior, heaving high his heavy blade, found her point in his jugular before he could strike. Conan, towering above the field, strode through the welter smiting right and left, but Valeria moved like an illusive phantom, constantly shifting, and thrusting and slashing as she shifted. Swords missed her again and again as the wielders flailed the empty air and died with her point in their hearts or throats, and her mocking laughter in their ears.

Neither sex nor condition was considered by the maddened combatants. The five women of the Xotalancas were down with their throats cut before Conan and Valeria entered the fray, and when a man or woman went down under the stamping feet, there was always a knife ready for the helpless throat, or a sandaled foot eager to crush the prostrate skull.

From wall to wall, from door to door rolled the waves of combat, spilling over into adjoining chambers. And presently only Tecuhltli and their white-skinned allies stood upright in the great throne-

room. The survivors stared bleakly and blankly at each other, like survivors after Judgment Day or the destruction of the world. On legs wide-braced, hands gripping notched and dripping swords, blood trickling down their arms, they stared at one another across the mangled corpses of friends and foes. They had no breath left to shout, but a bestial mad howling rose from their lips. It was not a human cry of triumph. It was the howling of a rabid wolf-pack stalking among the bodies of its victims.

Conan caught Valeria's arm and turned her about.

"You've got a stab in the calf of your leg," he growled.

She glanced down, for the first time aware of a stinging in the muscles of her leg. Some dying man on the floor had fleshed his dagger with his last effort.

"You look like a butcher yourself," she laughed.

He shook a red shower from his hands.

"Not mine. Oh, a scratch here and there. Nothing to bother about. But that calf ought to be bandaged."

OLMEC came through the litter, looking like a ghoul with his naked massive shoulders splashed with blood, and his black beard dabbled in crimson. His eyes were red, like the reflection of flame on black water.

"We have won!" he croaked dazedly. "The feud is ended! The dogs of Xotalanc lie dead! Oh, for a captive to flay alive! Yet it is good to look upon their dead faces. Twenty dead dogs! Twenty red nails for the black column!"

"You'd best see to your wounded," grunted Conan, turning away from him. "Here, girl, let me see that leg."

"Wait a minute!" she shook him off impatiently. The fire of fighting still burned brightly in her soul. "How do we know these are all of them? These might have come on a raid of their own."

"They would not split the clan on a foray like this," said Olmec, shaking his head, and regaining some of his ordinary intelligence. Without his purple robe the man seemed less like a prince than some repellent beast of prey. "I will stake my head upon it that we have slain them all. There were less of them than I dreamed, and they must have been desperate. But how came they in Tecuhltli?"

Tascela came forward, wiping her sword on her naked thigh, and holding in her other hand an object she had taken from the body of the feathered leader of the Xotalancas.

"The pipes of madness," she said. "A warrior tells me that Xatmec opened the door to the Xotalancas and was cut down as they stormed into the guardroom. This warrior came to the guardroom from the inner hall just in time to see it happen and to hear the last of a weird strain of music which froze his very soul. Tolkemec used to talk of these pipes, which the Xuchotlans swore were hidden somewhere in the catacombs with the bones of the ancient wizard who used them in his lifetime. Somehow the dogs of Xotalanc found them and learned their secret."

"Somebody ought to go to Xotalanc and see if any remain alive," said Conan. "I'll go if somebody will guide me."

Olmec glanced at the remnants of his people. There were only twenty left alive, and of these several lay groaning on the floor. Tascela was the only one of the Tecuhltli who had escaped without a wound. The princess was untouched, though she had fought as savagely as any.

"Who will go with Conan to Xotalanc?" asked Olmec.

Techotl limped forward. The wound

in his thigh had started bleeding afresh, and he had another gash across his ribs.

"I will go!"

"No, you won't," vetoed Conan. "And you're not going either, Valeria. In a little while that leg will be getting stiff."

"I will go," volunteered a warrior, who was knotting a bandage about a slashed forearm.

"Very well, Yanath. Go with the Cimmerian. And you, too, Topal." Olmec indicated another man whose injuries were slight. "But first aid us to lift the badly wounded on these couches where we may bandage their hurts."

This was done quickly. As they stooped to pick up a woman who had been stunned by a war-club, Olmec's beard brushed Topal's ear. Conan thought the prince muttered something to the warrior, but he could not be sure. A few moments later he was leading his companions down the hall.

Conan glanced back as he went out the door, at that shambles where the dead lay on the smoldering floor, blood-stained dark limbs knotted in attitudes of fierce muscular effort, dark faces frozen in masks of hate, glassy eyes glaring up at the green fire-jewels which bathed the ghastly scene in a dusky emerald witch-light. Among the dead the living moved aimlessly, like people moving in a trance. Conan heard Olmec call a woman and direct her to bandage Valeria's leg. The pirate followed the woman into an adjoining chamber, already beginning to limp slightly.

WARILY the two Tecuhltli led Conan along the hall beyond the bronze door, and through chamber after chamber shimmering in the green fire. They saw no one, heard no sound. After they crossed the Great Hall which bisected the city from north to south, their caution was increased by the realization of their nearness to enemy territory. But chambers and halls lay empty to their wary gaze, and they came at last along a broad dim hallway and halted before a bronze door similar to the Eagle Door of Tecuhltli. Gingerly they tried it, and it opened silently under their fingers. Awed, they stared into the green-lit chambers beyond. For fifty years no Tecuhltli had entered those halls save as a prisoner going to a hideous doom. To go to Xotalanc had been the ultimate horror that could befall a man of the western castle. The terror of it had stalked through their dreams since earliest childhood. To Yanath and Topal that bronze door was like the portal of hell.

They cringed back, unreasoning horror in their eyes, and Conan pushed past them and strode into Xotalanc.

Timidly they followed him. As each man set foot over the threshold he stared and glared wildly about him. But only their quick, hurried breathing disturbed the silence.

They had come into a square guardroom, like that behind the Eagle Door of Tecuhltli, and, similarly, a hall ran away from it to a broad chamber that was a counterpart of Olmec's throneroom.

Conan glanced down the hall with its rugs and divans and hangings, and stood listening intently. He heard no noise, and the rooms had an empty feel. He did not believe there were any Xotalancas left alive in Xuchotl.

"Come on," he muttered, and started down the hall.

He had not gone far when he was aware that only Yanath was following him. He wheeled back to see Topal standing in an attitude of horror, one arm out as if to fend off some threatening peril, his distended eyes fixed with hypnotic intensity on something protruding from behind a divan.

"What the devil?" Then Conan saw

what Topal was staring at, and he felt a faint twitching of the skin between his giant shoulders. A monstrous head protruded from behind the divan, a reptilian head, broad as the head of a crocodile, with down-curving fangs that projected over the lower jaw. But there was an unnatural limpness about the thing, and the hideous eyes were glazed.

Conan peered behind the couch. It was a great serpent which lay there limp in death, but such a serpent as he had never seen in his wanderings. The reek and chill of the deep black earth were about it, and its color was an indeterminable hue which changed with each new angle from which he surveyed it. A great wound in the neck showed what had caused its death.

"It is the Crawler!" whispered Yanath.

"It's the thing I slashed on the stair," grunted Conan. "After it trailed us to the Eagle Door, it dragged itself here to die. How could the Xotalancas control such a brute?"

The Tecuhltli shivered and shook their heads.

"They brought it up from the black tunnels *below* the catacombs. They discovered secrets unknown to Tecuhltli."

"Well, it's dead, and if they'd had any more of them, they'd have brought them along when they came to Tecuhltli. Come on."

They crowded close at his heels as he strode down the hall and thrust on the silver-worked door at the other end.

"If we don't find anybody on this floor," he said, "we'll descend into the lower floors. We'll explore Xotalanc from the roof to the catacombs. If Xotalanc is like Tecuhltli, all the rooms and halls in this tier will be lighted—what the devil!"

They had come into the broad throne-chamber, so similar to that one in Tecuhltli. There were the same jade dais and ivory seat, the same divans, rugs and hangings on the walls. No black, red-scarred column stood behind the throne-dais, but evidences of the grim feud were not lacking.

Ranged along the wall behind the dais were rows of glass-covered shelves. And on those shelves hundreds of human heads, perfectly preserved, stared at the startled watchers with emotionless eyes, as they had stared for only the gods knew how many months and years.

TOPAL muttered a curse, but Yanath stood silent, the mad light growing in his wide eyes. Conan frowned, knowing that Tlazitlan sanity was hung on a hair-trigger.

Suddenly Yanath pointed to the ghastly relics with a twitching finger.

"There is my brother's head!" he murmured. "And there is my father's younger brother! And there beyond them is my sister's eldest son!"

Suddenly he began to weep, dry-eyed, with harsh, loud sobs that shook his frame. He did not take his eyes from the heads. His sobs grew shriller, changed to frightful, high-pitched laughter, and that in turn became an unbearable screaming. Yanath was stark mad.

Conan laid a hand on his shoulder, and as if the touch had released all the frenzy in his soul, Yanath screamed and whirled, striking at the Cimmerian with his sword. Conan parried the blow, and Topal tried to catch Yanath's arm. But the madman avoided him and with froth flying from his lips, he drove his sword deep into Topal's body. Topal sank down with a groan, and Yanath whirled for an instant like a crazy dervish; then he ran at the shelves and began hacking at the glass with his sword, screeching blasphemously.

Conan sprang at him from behind, trying to catch him unaware and disarm him, but the madman wheeled and lunged at

him, screaming like a lost soul. Realizing that the warrior was hopelessly insane, the Cimmerian side-stepped, and as the maniac went past, he swung a cut that severed the shoulder-bone and breast, and dropped the man dead beside his dying victim.

Conan bent over Topal, seeing that the man was at his last gasp. It was useless to seek to stanch the blood gushing from the horrible wound.

"You're done for, Topal," grunted Conan. "Any word you want to send to your people?"

"Bend closer," gasped Topal, and Conan complied—and an instant later caught the man's wrist as Topal struck at his breast with a dagger.

"Crom!" swore Conan. "Are you mad, too?"

"Olmec ordered it!" gasped the dying man. "I know not why. As we lifted the wounded upon the couches he whispered to me, bidding me to slay you as we returned to Tecuhltli——" And with the name of his clan on his lips, Topal died.

Conan scowled down at him in puzzlement. This whole affair had an aspect of lunacy. Was Olmec mad, too? Were all the Tecuhltli madder than he had realized? With a shrug of his shoulders he strode down the hall and out of the bronze door, leaving the dead Tecuhltli lying before the staring dead eyes of their kinsmen's heads.

Conan needed no guide back through the labyrinth they had traversed. His primitive instinct of direction led him unerringly along the route they had come. He traversed it as warily as he had before, his sword in his hand, and his eyes fiercely searching each shadowed nook and corner; for it was his former allies he feared now, not the ghosts of the slain Xotalancas.

He had crossed the Great Hall and entered the chambers beyond when he heard something moving ahead of him—something which gasped and panted, and moved with a strange, floundering, scrambling noise. A moment later Conan saw a man crawling over the flaming floor toward him—a man whose progress left a broad bloody smear on the smoldering surface. It was Techotl and his eyes were already glazing; from a deep gash in his breast blood gushed steadily between the fingers of his clutching hand. With the other he clawed and hitched himself along.

"Conan," he cried chokingly, "Conan! Olmec has taken the yellow-haired woman!"

"So that's why he told Topal to kill me!" murmured Conan, dropping to his knee beside the man, who his experienced eye told him was dying. "Olmec isn't so mad as I thought."

Techotl's groping fingers plucked at Conan's arm. In the cold, loveless and altogether hideous life of the Tecuhltli his admiration and affection for the invaders from the outer world formed a warm, human oasis, constituted a tie that connected him with a more natural humanity that was totally lacking in his fellows, whose only emotions were hate, lust and the urge of sadistic cruelty.

"I sought to oppose him," gurgled Techotl, blood bubbling frothily to his lips. "But he struck me down. He thought he had slain me, but I crawled away. Ah, Set, how far I have crawled in my own blood! Beware, Conan! Olmec may have set an ambush for your return! Slay Olmec! He is a beast. Take Valeria and flee! Fear not to traverse the forest. Olmec and Tascela lied about the dragons. They slew each other years ago, all save the strongest. For a dozen years there has been only one dragon. If you have slain him, there is naught in the forest to harm you. He was the god Olmec worshipped; and Olmec fed human sacri-

fices to him, the very old and the very young, bound and hurled from the wall. Hasten! Olmec has taken Valeria to the Chamber of the——"

His head slumped down and he was dead before it came to rest on the floor.

CONAN sprang up, his eyes like live coals. So that was Olmec's game, having first used the strangers to destroy his foes! He should have known that something of the sort would be going on in that black-bearded degenerate's mind.

The Cimmerian started toward Tecuhltli with reckless speed. Rapidly he reckoned the numbers of his former allies. Only twenty-one, counting Olmec, had survived that fiendish battle in the throne-room. Three had died since, which left seventeen enemies with which to reckon. In his rage Conan felt capable of accounting for the whole clan single-handed.

But the innate craft of the wilderness rose to guide his berserk rage. He remembered Techotl's warning of an ambush. It was quite probable that the prince would make such provisions, on the chance that Topal might have failed to carry out his order. Olmec would be expecting him to return by the same route he had followed in going to Xotalanc.

Conan glanced up at a skylight under which he was passing and caught the blurred glimmer of stars. They had not yet begun to pale for dawn. The events of the night had been crowded into a comparatively short space of time.

He turned aside from his direct course and descended a winding staircase to the floor below. He did not know where the door was to be found that let into the castle on that level, but he knew he could find it. How he was to force the locks he did not know; he believed that the doors of Tecuhltli would all be locked and bolted, if for no other reason than the habits of half a century. But there was nothing else but to attempt it.

Sword in hand, he hurried noiselessly on through a maze of green-lit or shadowy rooms and halls. He knew he must be near Tecuhltli, when a sound brought him up short. He recognized it for what it was—a human being trying to cry out through a stifling gag. It came from somewhere ahead of him, and to the left. In those deathly-still chambers a small sound carried a long way.

Conan turned aside and went seeking after the sound, which continued to be repeated. Presently he was glaring through a doorway upon a weird scene. In the room into which he was looking a low rack-like frame of iron lay on the floor, and a giant figure was bound prostrate upon it. His head rested on a bed of iron spikes, which were already crimson-pointed with blood where they had pierced his scalp. A peculiar harness-like contrivance was fastened about his head, though in such a manner that the leather band did not protect his scalp from the spikes. This harness was connected by a slender chain to the mechanism that upheld a huge iron ball which was suspended above the captive's hairy breast. As long as the man could force himself to remain motionless the iron ball hung in its place. But when the pain of the iron points caused him to lift his head, the ball lurched downward a few inches. Presently his aching neck muscles would no longer support his head in its unnatural position and it would fall back on the spikes again. It was obvious that eventually the ball would crush him to a pulp, slowly and inexorably. The victim was gagged, and above the gag his great black ox-eyes rolled wildly toward the man in the doorway, who stood in silent amazement. The man on the rack was Olmec, prince of Tecuhltli.

6. *The Eyes of Tascela*

"WHY did you bring me into this chamber to bandage my legs?" demanded Valeria. "Couldn't you have done it just as well in the throneroom?"

She sat on a couch with her wounded leg extended upon it, and the Tecuhltli woman had just bound it with silk bandages. Valeria's red-stained sword lay on the couch beside her.

She frowned as she spoke. The woman had done her task silently and efficiently, but Valeria liked neither the lingering, caressing touch of her slim fingers nor the expression in her eyes.

"They have taken the rest of the wounded into the other chambers," answered the woman in the soft speech of the Tecuhltli women, which somehow did not suggest either softness or gentleness in the speakers. A little while before, Valeria had seen this same woman stab a Xotalanca woman through the breast and stamp the eyeballs out of a wounded Xotalanca man.

"They will be carrying the corpses of the dead down into the catacombs," she added, "lest the ghosts escape into the chambers and dwell there."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" asked Valeria.

"I know the ghost of Tolkemec dwells in the catacombs," she answered with a shiver. "Once I saw it, as I crouched in a crypt among the bones of a dead queen. It passed by in the form of an ancient man with flowing white beard and locks, and luminous eyes that blazed in the darkness. It was Tolkemec; I saw him living when I was a child and he was being tortured."

Her voice sank to a fearful whisper: "Olmec laughs, but I *know* Tolkemec's ghost dwells in the catacombs! They say it is rats which gnaw the flesh from the bones of the newly dead—but ghosts eat flesh. Who knows but that——"

She glanced up quickly as a shadow fell across the couch. Valeria looked up to see Olmec gazing down at her. The prince had cleansed his hands, torso and beard of the blood that had splashed them; but he had not donned his robe, and his great dark-skinned hairless body and limbs renewed the impression of strength bestial in its nature. His deep black eyes burned with a more elemental light, and there was the suggestion of a twitching in the fingers that tugged at his thick blue-black beard.

He stared fixedly at the woman, and she rose and glided from the chamber. As she passed through the door she cast a look over her shoulder at Valeria, a glance full of cynical derision and obscene mockery.

"She has done a clumsy job," criticized the prince, coming to the divan and bending over the bandage. "Let me see——"

With a quickness amazing in one of his bulk he snatched her sword and threw it across the chamber. His next move was to catch her in his giant arms.

Quick and unexpected as the move was, she almost matched it; for even as he grabbed her, her dirk was in her hand and she stabbed murderously at his throat. More by luck than skill he caught her wrist, and then began a savage wrestling-match. She fought him with fists, feet, knees, teeth and nails, with all the strength of her magnificent body and all the knowledge of hand-to-hand fighting she had acquired in her years of roving and fighting on sea and land. It availed her nothing against his brute strength. She lost her dirk in the first moment of contact, and thereafter found herself powerless to inflict any appreciable pain on her giant attacker.

The blaze in his weird black eyes did not alter, and their expression filled her

with fury, fanned by the sardonic smile that seemed carved upon his bearded lips. Those eyes and that smile contained all the cruel cynicism that seethes below the surface of a sophisticated and degenerate race, and for the first time in her life Valeria experienced fear of a man. It was like struggling against some huge elemental force; his iron arms thwarted her efforts with an ease that sent panic racing through her limbs. He seemed impervious to any pain she could inflict. Only once, when she sank her white teeth savagely into his wrist so that the blood started, did he react. And that was to buffet her brutally upon the side of the head with his open hand, so that stars flashed before her eyes and her head rolled on her shoulders.

Her shirt had been torn open in the struggle, and with cynical cruelty he rasped his thick beard across her bare breasts, bringing the blood to suffuse the fair skin, and fetching a cry of pain and outraged fury from her. Her convulsive resistance was useless; she was crushed down on a couch, disarmed and panting, her eyes blazing up at him like the eyes of a trapped tigress.

A moment later he was hurrying from the chamber, carrying her in his arms. She made no resistance, but the smoldering of her eyes showed that she was unconquered in spirit, at least. She had not cried out. She knew that Conan was not within call, and it did not occur to her that any in Tecuhltli would oppose their prince. But she noticed that Olmec went stealthily, with his head on one side as if listening for sounds of pursuit, and he did not return to the throne chamber. He carried her through a door that stood opposite that through which he had entered, crossed another room and began stealing down a hall. As she became convinced that he feared some opposition to the abduction, she threw back her head and screamed at the top of her lusty voice.

She was rewarded by a slap that half stunned her, and Olmec quickened his pace to a shambling run.

But her cry had been echoed, and twisting her head about, Valeria, through the tears and stars that partly blinded her, saw Techotl limping after them.

Olmec turned with a snarl, shifting the woman to an uncomfortable and certainly undignified position under one huge arm, where he held her writhing and kicking vainly, like a child.

"Olmec!" protested Techotl. "You cannot be such a dog as to do this thing! She is Conan's woman! She helped us slay the Xotalancas, and——"

WITHOUT a word Olmec balled his free hand into a huge fist and stretched the wounded warrior senseless at his feet. Stooping, and hindered not at all by the struggles and imprecations of his captive, he drew Techotl's sword from its sheath and stabbed the warrior in the breast. Then casting aside the weapon he fled on along the corridor. He did not see a woman's dark face peer cautiously after him from behind a hanging. It vanished, and presently Techotl groaned and stirred, rose dazedly and staggered drunkenly away, calling Conan's name.

Olmec hurried on down the corridor, and descended a winding ivory staircase. He crossed several corridors and halted at last in a broad chamber whose doors were veiled with heavy tapestries, with one exception—a heavy bronze door similar to the Door of the Eagle on the upper floor.

He was moved to rumble, pointing to it: "That is one of the outer doors of Tecuhltli. For the first time in fifty years it is unguarded. We need not guard it now, for Xotalanc is no more."

"Thanks to Conan and me, you bloody rogue!" sneered Valeria, trembling with fury and the shame of physical coercion. "You treacherous dog! Conan will cut your throat for this!"

Olmec did not bother to voice his belief that Conan's own gullet had already been severed according to his whispered command. He was too utterly cynical to be at all interested in her thoughts or opinions. His flame-lit eyes devoured her, dwelling burningly on the generous expanses of clear white flesh exposed where her shirt and breeches had been torn in the struggle.

"Forget Conan," he said thickly. "Olmec is lord of Xuchotl. Xotalanc is no more. There will be no more fighting. We shall spend our lives in drinking and love-making. First let us drink!"

He seated himself on an ivory table and pulled her down on his knees, like a dark-skinned satyr with a white nymph in his arms. Ignoring her un-nymphlike profanity, he held her helpless with one great arm about her waist while the other reached across the table and secured a vessel of wine.

"Drink!" he commanded, forcing it to her lips, as she writhed her head away.

The liquor slopped over, stinging her lips, splashing down on her naked breasts.

"Your guest does not like your wine, Olmec," spoke a cool, sardonic voice.

Olmec stiffened; fear grew in his flaming eyes. Slowly he swung his great head about and stared at Tascela who posed negligently in the curtained doorway, one hand on her smooth hip. Valeria twisted herself about in his iron grip, and when she met the burning eyes of Tascela, a chill tingled along her supple spine. New experiences were flooding Valeria's proud soul that night. Recently she had learned to fear a man; now she knew what it was to fear a woman.

Olmec sat motionless, a gray pallor growing under his swarthy skin. Tascela brought her other hand from behind her and displayed a small gold vessel.

"I feared she would not like your wine, Olmec," purred the princess, "so I brought some of mine, some I brought with me long ago from the shores of Lake Zuad—do you understand, Olmec?"

Beads of sweat stood out suddenly on Olmec's brow. His muscles relaxed, and Valeria broke away and put the table between them. But though reason told her to dart from the room, some fascination she could not understand held her rigid, watching the scene.

Tascela came toward the seated prince with a swaying, undulating walk that was mockery in itself. Her voice was soft, slurringly caressing, but her eyes gleamed. Her slim fingers stroked his beard lightly.

"You are selfish, Olmec," she crooned, smiling. "You would keep our handsome guest to yourself, though you knew I wished to entertain her. You are much at fault, Olmec!"

The mask dropped for an instant; her eyes flashed, her face was contorted and with an appalling show of strength her hand locked convulsively in his beard and tore out a great handful. This evidence of unnatural strength was no more terrifying than the momentary baring of the hellish fury that raged under her bland exterior.

Olmec lurched up with a roar, and stood swaying like a bear, his mighty hands clenching and unclenching.

"Slut!" His booming voice filled the room. "Witch! She-devil! Tecuhltli should have slain you fifty years ago! Begone! I have endured too much from you! This white-skinned wench is mine! Get hence before I slay you!"

The princess laughed and dashed the blood-stained strands into his face. Her laughter was less merciful than the ring of flint on steel.

"Once you spoke otherwise, Olmec," she taunted. "Once, in your youth, you spoke words of love. Aye, you were my lover once, years ago, and because you loved me, you slept in my arms beneath the enchanted lotus—and thereby put into my hands the chains that enslaved you. You know you cannot withstand me. You know I have but to gaze into your eyes, with the mystic power a priest of Stygia taught me, long ago, and you are powerless. You remember the night beneath the black lotus that waved above us, stirred by no worldly breeze; you scent again the unearthly perfumes that stole and rose like a cloud about you to enslave you. You cannot fight against me. You are my slave as you were that night—as you shall be so long as you shall live, Olmec of Xuchotl!"

HER voice had sunk to a murmur like the rippling of a stream running through starlit darkness. She leaned close to the prince and spread her long tapering fingers upon his giant breast. His eyes glazed, his great hands fell limply to his sides.

With a smile of cruel malice, Tascela lifted the vessel and placed it to his lips.

"Drink!"

Mechanically the prince obeyed. And instantly the glaze passed from his eyes and they were flooded with fury, comprehension and an awful fear. His mouth gaped, but no sound issued. For an instant he reeled on buckling knees, and then fell in a sodden heap on the floor.

His fall jolted Valeria out of her paralysis. She turned and sprang toward the door, but with a movement that would have shamed a leaping panther, Tascela was before her. Valeria struck at her with her clenched fist, and all the power of her supple body behind the blow. It would have stretched a man senseless on the floor. But with a lithe twist of her torso, Tascela avoided the blow and caught the pirate's wrist. The next instant Valeria's left hand was imprisoned, and holding her wrists together with one hand, Tascela calmly bound them with a cord she drew from her girdle. Valeria thought she had tasted the ultimate in humiliation already that night, but her shame at being manhandled by Olmec was nothing to the sensations that now shook her supple frame. Valeria had always been inclined to despise the other members of her sex; and it was overwhelming to encounter another woman who could handle her like a child. She scarcely resisted at all when Tascela forced her into a chair and drawing her bound wrists down between her knees, fastened them to the chair.

Casually stepping over Olmec, Tascela walked to the bronze door and shot the bolt and threw it open, revealing a hallway without.

"Opening upon this hall," she remarked, speaking to her feminine captive for the first time, "there is a chamber which in old times was used as a torture room. When we retired into Tecuhltli, we brought most of the apparatus with us, but there was one piece too heavy to move. It is still in working order. I think it will be quite convenient now."

An understanding flame of terror rose in Olmec's eyes. Tascela strode back to him, bent and gripped him by the hair.

"He is only paralyzed temporarily," she remarked conversationally. "He can hear, think, and feel—aye, he can feel very well indeed!"

With which sinister observation she started toward the door, dragging the giant bulk with an ease that made the pirate's eyes dilate. She passed into the hall and moved down it without hesitation, presently disappearing with her captive into a chamber that opened into it,

and whence shortly thereafter issued the clank of iron.

Valeria swore softly and tugged vainly, with her legs braced against the chair. The cords that confined her were apparently unbreakable.

Tascela presently returned alone; behind her a muffled groaning issued from the chamber. She closed the door but did not bolt it. Tascela was beyond the grip of habit, as she was beyond the touch of other human instincts and emotions.

Valeria sat dumbly, watching the woman in whose slim hands, the pirate realized, her destiny now rested.

Tascela grasped her yellow locks and forced back her head, looking impersonally down into her face. But the glitter in her dark eyes was not impersonal.

"I have chosen you for a great honor," she said. "You shall restore the youth of Tascela. Oh, you stare at that! My appearance is that of youth, but through my veins creeps the sluggish chill of approaching age, as I have felt it a thousand times before. I am old, so old I do not remember my childhood. But I was a girl once, and a priest of Stygia loved me, and gave me the secret of immortality and youth everlasting. He died, then—some said by poison. But I dwelt in my palace by the shores of Lake Zuad and the passing years touched me not. So at last a king of Stygia desired me, and my people rebelled and brought me to this land. Olmec called me a princess. I am not of royal blood. I am greater than a princess. I am Tascela, whose youth your own glorious youth shall restore."

Valeria's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She sensed here a mystery darker than the degeneracy she had anticipated.

The taller woman unbound the Aquilonian's wrists and pulled her to her feet. It was not fear of the dominant strength that lurked in the princess' limbs that made Valeria a helpless, quivering captive in her hands. It was the burning, hypnotic, terrible eyes of Tascela.

7. *He Comes from the Dark*

"WELL, I'm a Kushite!"

Conan glared down at the man on the iron rack.

"What the devil are *you* doing on that thing?"

Incoherent sounds issued from behind the gag and Conan bent and tore it away, evoking a bellow of fear from the captive; for his action caused the iron ball to lurch down until it nearly touched the broad breast.

"Be careful, for Set's sake!" begged Olmec.

"What for?" demanded Conan. "Do you think I care what happens to you? I only wish I had time to stay here and watch that chunk of iron grind your guts out. But I'm in a hurry. Where's Valeria?"

"Loose me!" urged Olmec. "I will tell you all!"

"Tell me first."

"Never!" The prince's heavy jaws set stubbornly.

"All right." Conan seated himself on a near-by bench. "I'll find her myself, after you've been reduced to a jelly. I believe I can speed up that process by twisting my sword-point around in your ear," he added, extending the weapon experimentally.

"Wait!" Words came in a rush from the captive's ashy lips. "Tascela took her from me. I've never been anything but a puppet in Tascela's hands."

"Tascela?" snorted Conan, and spat. "Why, the filthy——"

"No, no!" panted Olmec. "It's worse than you think. Tascela is old—centuries old. She renews her life and her youth by the sacrifice of beautiful young wo-

men. That's one thing that has reduced the clan to its present state. She will draw the essence of Valeria's life into her own body, and bloom with fresh vigor and beauty."

"Are the doors locked?" asked Conan, thumbing his sword edge.

"Aye! But I know a way to get into Tecuhltli. Only Tascela and I know, and she thinks me helpless and you slain. Free me and I swear I will help you rescue Valeria. Without my help you cannot win into Techultli; for even if you tortured me into revealing the secret, you couldn't work it. Let me go, and we will steal on Tascela and kill her before she can work magic—before she can fix her eyes on us. A knife thrown from behind will do the work. I should have killed her thus long ago, but I feared that without her to aid us the Xotalancas would overcome us. She needed my help, too; that's the only reason she let me live this long. Now neither needs the other, and one must die. I swear that when we have slain the witch, you and Valeria shall go free without harm. My people will obey me when Tascela is dead."

Conan stooped and cut the ropes that held the prince, and Olmec slid cautiously from under the great ball and rose, shaking his head like a bull and muttering imprecations as he fingered his lacerated scalp. Standing shoulder to shoulder the two men presented a formidable picture of primitive power. Olmec was as tall as Conan, and heavier; but there was something repellent about the Tlazitlan, something abysmal and monstrous that contrasted unfavorably with the clean-cut, compact hardness of the Cimmerian. Conan had discarded the remnants of his tattered, blood-soaked shirt, and stood with his remarkable muscular development impressively revealed. His great shoulders were as broad as those of Olmec, and more cleanly outlined, and his huge breast arched with a more impressive sweep to a hard waist that lacked the paunchy thickness of Olmec's midsection. He might have been an image of primal strength cut out of bronze. Olmec was darker, but not from the burning of the sun. If Conan was a figure out of the dawn of Time, Olmec was a shambling, somber shape from the darkness of Time's pre-dawn.

"Lead on," demanded Conan. "And keep ahead of me. I don't trust you any farther than I can throw a bull by the tail."

Olmec turned and stalked on ahead of him, one hand twitching slightly as it plucked at his matted beard.

Olmec did not lead Conan back to the bronze door, which the prince naturally supposed Tascela had locked, but to a certain chamber on the border of Tecuhltli.

"This secret has been guarded for half a century," he said. "Not even our own clan knew of it, and the Xotalancas never learned. Tecuhltli himself built this secret entrance, afterward slaying the slaves who did the work; for he feared that he might find himself locked out of his own kingdom some day because of the spite of Tascela, whose passion for him soon changed to hate. But she discovered the secret, and barred the hidden door against him one day as he fled back from an unsuccessful raid, and the Xotalancas took him and flayed him. But once, spying upon her, I saw her enter Tecuhltli by this route, and so learned the secret."

He pressed upon a gold ornament in the wall, and a panel swung inward, disclosing an ivory stair leading upward.

"This stair is built within the wall," said Olmec. "It leads up to a tower upon the roof, and thence other stairs wind down to the various chambers. Hasten!"

"After you, comrade!" retorted Conan

satirically, swaying his broadsword as he spoke, and Olmec shrugged his shoulders and stepped onto the staircase. Conan instantly followed him, and the door shut behind them. Far above a cluster of fire-jewels made the staircase a well of dusky dragon-light.

They mounted until Conan estimated that they were above the level of the fourth floor, and then came out into a cylindrical tower, in the domed roof of which was set the bunch of fire-jewels that lighted the stair. Through gold-barred windows, set with unbreakable crystal panes, the first windows he had seen in Xuchotl, Conan got a glimpse of high ridges, domes and more towers, looming darkly against the stars. He was looking across the roofs of Xuchotl.

Olmec did not look through the windows. He hurried down one of the several stairs that wound down from the tower, and when they had descended a few feet, this stair changed into a narrow corridor that wound tortuously on for some distance. It ceased at a steep flight of steps leading downward. There Olmec paused.

Up from below, muffled, but unmistakable, welled a woman's scream, edged with fright, fury and shame. And Conan recognized Valeria's voice.

In the swift rage roused by that cry, and the amazement of wondering what peril could wring such a shriek from Valeria's reckless lips, Conan forgot Olmec. He pushed past the prince and started down the stair. Awakening instinct brought him about again, just as Olmec struck with his great mallet-like fist. The blow, fierce and silent, was aimed at the base of Conan's brain. But the Cimmerian wheeled in time to receive the buffet on the side of his neck instead. The impact would have snapped the vertebræ of a lesser man. As it was, Conan swayed backward, but even as he reeled he dropped his sword, useless at such close quarters, and grasped Olmec's extended arm, dragging the prince with him as he fell. Headlong they went down the steps together, in a revolving whirl of limbs and heads and bodies. And as they went Conan's iron fingers found and locked in Olmec's bull-throat.

The barbarian's neck and shoulder felt numb from the sledge-like impact of Olmec's huge fist, which had carried all the strength of the massive forearm, thick triceps and great shoulder. But this did not affect his ferocity to any appreciable extent. Like a bulldog he hung on grimly, shaken and battered and beaten against the steps as they rolled, until at last they struck an ivory panel-door at the bottom with such an impact that they splintered it its full length and crashed through its ruins. But Olmec was already dead, for those iron fingers had crushed out his life and broken his neck as they fell.

CONAN rose, shaking the splinters from his great shoulder, blinking blood and dust out of his eyes.

He was in the great throneroom. There were fifteen people in that room besides himself. The first person he saw was Valeria. A curious black altar stood before the throne-dais. Ranged about it, seven black candles in golden candlesticks sent up oozing spirals of thick green smoke, disturbingly scented. These spirals united in a cloud near the ceiling, forming a smoky arch above the altar. On that altar lay Valeria, stark naked, her white flesh gleaming in shocking contrast to the glistening ebon stone. She was not bound. She lay at full length, her arms stretched out above her head to their fullest extent. At the head of the altar knelt a young man, holding her wrists firmly. A young woman knelt at the other end of the altar, grasping her ankles. Between them she could neither rise nor move.

Eleven men and women of Tecuhltli knelt dumbly in a semicircle, watching the scene with hot, lustful eyes.

On the ivory throne-seat Tascela lolled. Bronze bowls of incense rolled their spirals about her; the wisps of smoke curled about her naked limbs like caressing fingers. She could not sit still; she squirmed and shifted about with sensuous abandon, as if finding pleasure in the contact of the smooth ivory with her sleek flesh.

The crash of the door as it broke beneath the impact of the hurtling bodies caused no change in the scene. The kneeling men and women merely glanced incuriously at the corpse of their prince and at the man who rose from the ruins of the door, then swung their eyes greedily back to the writhing white shape on the black altar. Tascela looked insolently at him, and sprawled back on her seat, laughing mockingly.

"Slut!" Conan saw red. His hands clenched into iron hammers as he started for her. With his first step something clanged loudly and steel bit savagely into his leg. He stumbled and almost fell, checked in his headlong stride. The jaws of an iron trap had closed on his leg, with teeth that sank deep and held. Only the ridged muscles of his calf saved the bone from being splintered. The accursed thing had sprung out of the smoldering floor without warning. He saw the slots now, in the floor where the jaws had lain, perfectly camouflaged.

"Fool!" laughed Tascela. "Did you think I would not guard against your possible return? Every door in this chamber is guarded by such traps. Stand there and watch now, while I fulfill the destiny of your handsome friend! Then I will decide your own."

Conan's hand instinctively sought his belt, only to encounter an empty scabbard. His sword was on the stair behind him. His poniard was lying back in the forest, where the dragon had torn it from his jaw. The steel teeth in his leg were like burning coals, but the pain was not as savage as the fury that seethed in his soul. He was trapped, like a wolf. If he had had his sword he would have hewn off his leg and crawled across the floor to slay Tascela. Valeria's eyes rolled toward him with mute appeal, and his own helplessness sent red waves of madness surging through his brain.

Dropping on the knee of his free leg, he strove to get his fingers between the jaws of the trap, to tear them apart by sheer strength. Blood started from beneath his finger nails, but the jaws fitted close about his leg in a circle whose segments jointed perfectly, contracted until there was no space between his mangled flesh and the fanged iron. The sight of Valeria's naked body added flame to the fire of his rage.

Tascela ignored him. Rising languidly from her seat she swept the ranks of her subjects with a searching glance, and asked: "Where are Xamec, Zlanath and Tachic?"

"They did not return from the catacombs, princess," answered a man. "Like the rest of us, they bore the bodies of the slain into the crypts, but they have not returned. Perhaps the ghost of Tolkemec took them."

"Be silent, fool!" she ordered harshly. "The ghost is a myth."

She came down from her dais, playing with a thin gold-hilted dagger. Her eyes burned like nothing on the hither side of hell. She paused beside the altar and spoke in the tense stillness.

"Your life shall make me young, white woman!" she said. "I shall lean upon your bosom and place my lips over yours, and slowly—ah, slowly!—sink this blade through your heart, so that your life, fleeing your stiffening body, shall enter mine,

making me bloom again with youth and with life everlasting!"

Slowly, like a serpent arching toward its victim, she bent down through the writhing smoke, closer and closer over the now motionless woman who stared up into her glowing dark eyes—eyes that grew larger and deeper, blazing like black moons in the swirling smoke.

The kneeling people gripped their hands and held their breath, tense for the bloody climax, and the only sound was Conan's fierce panting as he strove to tear his leg from the trap.

All eyes were glued on the altar and the white figure there; the crash of a thunderbolt could hardly have broken the spell, yet it was only a low cry that shattered the fixity of the scene and brought all whirling about—a low cry, yet one to make the hair stand up stiffly on the scalp. They looked, and they saw.

Framed in the door to the left of the dais stood a nightmare figure. It was a man, with a tangle of white hair and a matted white beard that fell over his breast. Rags only partly covered his gaunt frame, revealing half-naked limbs strangely unnatural in appearance. The skin was not like that of a normal human. There was a suggestion of *scaliness* about it, as if the owner had dwelt long under conditions almost antithetical to those conditions under which human life ordinarily thrives. And there was nothing at all human about the eyes that blazed from the tangle of white hair. They were great gleaming disks that stared unwinkingly, luminous, whitish, and without a hint of normal emotion or sanity. The mouth gaped, but no coherent words issued—only a high-pitched tittering.

"TOLKEMEC!" whispered Tascela, livid, while the others crouched in speechless horror. "No myth, then, no ghost! Set! You have dwelt for twelve years in darkness! Twelve years among the bones of the dead! What grisly food did you find? What mad travesty of life did you live, in the stark blackness of that eternal night? I see now why Xamec and Zlanath and Tachic did not return from the catacombs—and never will return. But why have you waited so long to strike? Were you seeking something, in the pits? Some secret weapon you knew was hidden there? And have you found it at last?"

That hideous tittering was Tolkemec's only reply, as he bounded into the room with a long leap that carried him over the secret trap before the door—by chance, or by some faint recollection of the ways of Xuchotl. He was not mad, as a man is mad. He had dwelt apart from humanity so long that he was no longer human. Only an unbroken thread of memory embodied in hate and the urge for vengeance had connected him with the humanity from which he had been cut off, and held him lurking near the people he hated. Only that thin string had kept him from racing and prancing off for ever into the black corridors and realms of the subterranean world he had discovered, long ago.

"You sought something hidden!" whispered Tascela, cringing back. "And you have found it! You remember the feud! After all these years of blackness, you remember!"

For in the lean hand of Tolkemec now waved a curious jade-hued wand, on the end of which glowed a knob of crimson shaped like a pomegranate. She sprang aside as he thrust it out like a spear, and a beam of crimson fire lanced from the pomegranate. It missed Tascela, but the woman holding Valeria's ankles was in the way. It smote between her shoulders. There was a sharp crackling sound and the ray of fire flashed from her bosom and struck the black altar, with a snap-

ping of blue sparks. The woman toppled sidewise, shriveling and withering like a mummy even as she fell.

Valeria rolled from the altar on the other side, and started for the opposite wall on all fours. For hell had burst loose in the throneroom of dead Olmec.

The man who had held Valeria's hands was the next to die. He turned to run, but before he had taken half a dozen steps, Tolkemec, with an agility appalling in such a frame, bounded around to a position that placed the man between him and the altar. Again the red fire-beam flashed and the Tecuhltli rolled lifeless to the floor, as the beam completed its course with a burst of blue sparks against the altar.

Then began slaughter. Screaming insanely the people rushed about the chamber, caroming from one another, stumbling and falling. And among them Tolkemec capered and pranced, dealing death. They could not escape by the doors; for apparently the metal of the portals served like the metal-veined stone altar to complete the circuit for whatever hellish power flashed like thunderbolts from the witch-wand the ancient waved in his hand. When he caught a man or a woman between him and a door or the altar, that one died instantly. He chose no special victim. He took them as they came, with his rags flapping about his wildly gyrating limbs, and the gusty echoes of his tittering sweeping the room above the screams. And bodies fell like falling leaves about the altar and at the doors. One warrior in desperation rushed at him, lifting a dagger, only to fall before he could strike. But the rest were like crazed cattle, with no thought for resistance, and no chance of escape.

The last Tecuhltli except Tascela had fallen when the princess reached the Cimmerian and the girl who had taken refuge beside him. Tascela bent and touched the floor, pressing a design upon it. Instantly the iron jaws released the bleeding limb and sank back into the floor.

"Slay him if you can!" she panted, and pressed a heavy knife into his hand. "I have no magic to withstand him!"

With a grunt he sprang before the women, not heeding his lacerated leg in the heat of the fighting-lust. Tolkemec was coming toward him, his weird eyes ablaze, but he hesitated at the gleam of the knife in Conan's hand. Then began a grim game, as Tolkemec sought to circle about Conan and get the barbarian between him and the altar or a metal door, while Conan sought to avoid this and drive home his knife. The women watched tensely, holding their breath.

There was no sound except the rustle and scrape of quick-shifting feet. Tolkemec pranced and capered no more. He realized that grimmer game confronted him than the people who had died screaming and fleeing. In the elemental blaze of the barbarian's eyes he read an intent deadly as his own. Back and forth they weaved, and when one moved the other moved as if invisible threads bound them together. But all the time Conan was getting closer and closer to his enemy. Already the coiled muscles of his thighs were beginning to flex for a spring, when Valeria cried out. For a fleeting instant a bronze door was in line with Conan's moving body. The red line leaped, searing Conan's flank as he twisted aside, and even as he shifted he hurled the knife. Old Tolkemec went down, truly slain at last, the hilt vibrating on his breast.

TASCELA sprang—not toward Conan, but toward the wand where it shimmered like a live thing on the floor. But as she leaped, so did Valeria, with a dagger snatched from a dead man, and the

blade, driven with all the power of the pirate's muscles, impaled the princess of Tecuhltli so that the point stood out between her breasts. Tascela screamed once and fell dead, and Valeria spurned the body with her heel as it fell.

"I had to do that much, for my own self-respect!" panted Valeria, facing Conan across the limp corpse.

"Well, this cleans up the feud," he grunted. "It's been a hell of a night! Where did these people keep their food? I'm hungry."

"You need a bandage on that leg." Valeria ripped a length of silk from a hanging and knotted it about her waist, then tore off some smaller strips which she bound efficiently about the barbarian's lacerated limb.

"I can walk on it," he assured her. "Let's begone. It's dawn, outside this infernal city. I've had enough of Xuchotl. It's well the breed exterminated itself. I don't want any of their accursed jewels. They might be haunted."

"There is enough clean loot in the world for you and me," she said, straightening to stand tall and splendid before him.

The old blaze came back in his eyes, and this time she did not resist as he caught her fiercely in his arms.

"It's a long way to the coast," she said presently, withdrawing her lips from his.

"What matter?" he laughed. "There's nothing we can't conquer. We'll have our feet on a ship's deck before the Stygians open their ports for the trading season. And then we'll show the world what plundering means!"

[THE END]

R. E. H.

Died June 11, 1936

By R. H. BARLOW

Conan, the warrior king, lies stricken dead
  Beneath a sky of cryptic stars; the lute
  That was his laughter stilled, and sadly mute
Upon the chilling earth his youthful head.
There sounds for him no more the clamorous fray,
  But dirges now, where once the trumpet loud:
  About him press old memories for shroud,
And ended is the conflict of the day.

Death spilled the blood of him who loved the fight
  As men love mistresses, and fought it well—
  His fair young flesh is marble where he fell
With broken sword that vanquished all but Night;
  And as of mythic kings our words must speak
  Of Conan now, who roves where dreamers seek.

The Doors of Death

By ARTHUR B. WALTERMIRE

A strange and curious story is this, about a banker whose only fear was that he might be buried alive, like his grandfather before him

A HEAVY stillness hung about the great halls and richly furnished rooms of Judson McMasters' residence, and even seemed to extend out over the velvet lawns, the shrub-lined walks and sun-blotched reaches under the lacy elms and somber maples.

Biggs glided about the sick-chamber like a specter, apparently striving to keep busy, while he cast countless furtive, uneasy glances at the heavy figure under the white sheets. An odor of drugs and fever tainted the air, and a small walnut table near the flushed sleeper was laden with the familiar prescription bottle, tumbler and box of powders. On the wall behind the table, near the head of the bed, hung a small oil-painting of Napoleon.

The sleeper stirred restlessly, raised himself painfully and slowly, and attempted to seek fleeting comfort in a new position. At the first movement Biggs was a shadow at the bedside, deftly manipulating the coverings and gently aiding the sick man with a tenderness born of long service and deep affection. As the massive gray head sank into the fluffed pillow the tired eyes opened, lighted by a faint glint of thankfulness. Then they closed again and the once powerful body relaxed.

With a pitiful, wistful expression on his aged face, the faithful Biggs stood helplessly peering at the sick man until hot tears began to course down his furrowed cheeks, and he turned hastily away.

"Biggs!"

The voice, still strong and commanding, cut the semi-gloom like a knife.

Biggs, who was about to tuck the heavy curtains still more securely over the windows, whirled as though he had touched a live wire, and in a flash was across the great room and beside the bed.

"Did you call, sir?" His voice quavered.

"No"—a faint twinkle lighted the sick man's eyes—"I just spoke."

"Ah, now sir," cried the overjoyed Biggs, "you are better, sir."

"Biggs, I want some air and sunshine."

"But the doctor, sir——"

"Drat the doctor! If I'm going to pass out I want to see where I'm going."

"Oh, but sir," expostulated the old servant, as he parted the curtains and partially opened a casement window, "I wish you wouldn't say that, sir."

"I believe in facing a situation squarely, Biggs. My father and grandfather died from this family malady, and I guess I'm headed over the same route."

"Please, sir," entreated Biggs.

"Biggs, I want to ask you a question."

"Yes, sir?"

"Are you a Christian?"

"I try to be, sir."

"Do you believe in death?"

Biggs was thoroughly startled and confused.

"Why—a—we all have to die, some-

time, sir," he answered haltingly, not knowing what else to say.

"But do we actually die?" insisted the sufferer.

"Well, I hope—not yet," ventured the old servant. "The doctor said——"

"Forget the doctor," interposed McMasters. "Biggs, you have been in our service since I was a lad, haven't you?"

Tears welled into the servant's eyes, and his voice faltered.

"Fifty-six years, come next November," he answered.

"Well, let me tell you something, that even in those fifty-six years you never learned, Biggs. My grandfather was buried alive!"

"Oh, sir! Impossible!" cried Biggs, in horror.

"Absolutely," asserted the banker.

"Why—are you—how do you know, sir?" in a hoarse whisper.

"My father built a family mausoleum in the far corner of this estate, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir—he hated burial in the earth, sir, after reading a poem of Edgar Allan Poe's, sir!"

"What poem was that, Biggs?"

"I don't recall the name of it, but I remember the line," faltered Biggs.

"What was it?"

"Oh, sir," cried the old man, "let's talk about something cheerful."

"Not until we're through with this discussion, Hiram."

THE SOUND of his given name restored Biggs somewhat, for the banker resorted to it only on occasions when he shared his deepest confidences with his old houseman.

"Well, the line goes, 'Soft may the worms about him creep,' sir."

A slight shudder seemed to run through McMasters' body. Then after a tomb-like silence, "Good reason for building the mausoleum."

"Yes, sir, I think so, sir."

"Well," with an apparent effort, "when they exhumed my grandfather's remains to place them in the new vault, the casket was opened, and——"

"Oh, sir," cried Biggs, throwing out a trembling, expostulating hand, but the banker went on, relentlessly.

"——the body was turned over, on its side, with the left knee drawn up partway."

"That's the way he always slept—in life." Biggs' voice was a hollow whisper.

"And that's the reason my father, after building himself a mausoleum, insisted that his body be cremated," said McMasters. "He took no chances."

Biggs' horrified eyes traveled dully to the massive urn over the great fireplace and rested there, fascinated.

"Hiram, where is heaven?"

Biggs' eyes flitted back to rest in surprize upon the questioner.

"Why, up there, sir," pointing toward the ceiling.

"Do you believe that the earth rotates on its axis?"

"That's what I was taught in school, sir."

"If that hypothesis is true, we are rolling through space at the rate of about sixteen miles a minute," figured the banker. "Now you say heaven is up there."

"Yes, sir."

"Biggs, what time is it?"

The servant glanced at the great clock in the corner.

"Ah, it's twelve o'clock, sir, and time for your medicine," in a voice full of relief.

"Never mind the drugs," commanded McMasters, "until we finish our problem in higher mathematics. Now, if I ask you where heaven is at midnight,

which will be twelve hours from now, where will you point," triumphantly.

"Why, up there," replied the bewildered servant, again indicating the ceiling.

"Then," cried McMasters, "you will be pointing directly opposite from the place you indicated a moment ago; for by midnight the earth will have turned approximately upside down. Do you get my point?"

"Yes, sir," replied poor Biggs, thoroughly befuddled.

"Then where will heaven be at six o'clock this evening?" fairly shouted the sick man.

"Out there," replied the servant, hopelessly, pointing toward the window.

"And where will heaven be at six o'clock in the morning?"

"Over there." And Biggs pointed a trembling finger at the fireplace. Then, "Oh, sir, let's not—the doctor——"

"Hang the doctor," interrupted McMasters testily. "I've been thinking this thing over, and I've got to talk about it to someone."

"But don't you believe in a hereafter?" queried Biggs, a horrible note of fear in his pitiful voice.

For a moment the banker was silent; the massive clock ticked solemnly on. A coal toppled with a sputter and flare in the fireplace.

"Yes, Hiram," in a thoughtful voice, "I suppose I do."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," cried Biggs in very evident relief.

"Ah, if you could but tell me," continued the banker, "from whence we come, and whither we go?"

"If I knew, sir, I'd be equal with the Creator," answered Biggs with reverence.

"That's well said, Hiram, but it doesn't satisfy me. I've made my place in the world by getting to the root of things. Ah, if I could only get a peek behind the curtain, before I go—back-stage, you know—mayhap I would not be afraid to die," and his voice fell almost to a whisper.

"The Great Director does not permit the audience behind the footlights, unless he calls them," answered Biggs whimsically, the ghost of a smile lighting up his troubled features.

"Another thing, Biggs, do you believe those stories about Jonah, and Lazarus, and the fellow they let down through a hole in the roof to be healed?"

"I do, sir," with conviction.

"Do you understand how it was done?" testily.

"Of course not, sir, being only a human."

"Then tell me, Hiram, when you cannot see through it, how can you swallow all this theology?"

"My faith, sir," answered Biggs, simply, raising his eyes with reverence.

At this, a quizzical smile came over the sick man's face.

"In looking up, Hiram, don't forget, since it is twelve-thirty, that we have swung around four hundred and eighty miles from the spot you originally designated as the location of the Pearly Gates."

"Oh, sir, I beg of you," remonstrated the servant, "I cannot bear to have you jest on such a—why, master!" he broke off with a little cry, rushing to his bedside.

The quizzical smile on the banker's face had suddenly faded, and his head had fallen feebly back upon the pillow.

"Oh, why did he waste his strength so?" cried Biggs, piteously, as with trembling hands and tear-blurred eyes he searched the little table for the smelling-salts.

After a few breaths, the patient sighed and opened his eyes wearily.

"My medicine, Hiram, and then I must rest."

At midnight, Biggs, dozing in a big chair by the fire, was aroused by a voice from the sick bed.

"Hiram."

"Yes, sir," scurrying to turn on a subdued light.

"Where is heaven now?"

Noting the wan flicker of a smile, the old servant pointed solemnly downward.

"You are a bright pupil," came in a scarcely audible voice.

"Thank you, sir."

"Do you know, Biggs, I wish I had led a different—a better life."

"You have been a good master, sir. You have been kind, you have given liberally to charity," Biggs defended him.

"Yes," cynically, "I have given liberally to charity. But it has been no sacrifice."

"You have been a pillar in the church," ventured Biggs.

"Yes," bitterly, "a stone pillar. I have paid handsomely for my pew, and slept peacefully through the sermons. I have bought baskets of food for the poor at Thanksgiving and Christmas time, only to let others reap the happiness of giving them away. I could have had so much joy out of Christmas, if I would. I could have been a jolly, rosy-cheeked Santa Claus and gone to a hundred homes, my arms loaded with gifts."

"True, sir, but you made that joy possible for others."

"When I should have known the thrill of it myself. I have not really lived, Hiram. To draw the sweets truly out of life, one must humble himself and serve his fellow men. Yes, the scales have fallen from my eyes, Hiram. But it is too late, 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak'."

"It doesn't seem right, sir," said Biggs after a pause.

"What's that, Hiram?"

"Why, sir, that you should be stricken down in the prime of life, just at a time when you could mean so much to others, while I, old and useless, am permitted to live on. But I am not finding fault with Providence, sir," Biggs hastened to say; "I just can't find the meaning of the riddle, sir."

"Probably I've had my chance and fumbled it, Biggs."

"Even so, sir, God is not vindictive, according to my ideas. There surely is some other solution. I'm still going to pray that He will take me in your stead, even if a miracle must be performed."

"So you have faith in your prayers, do you, Biggs?"

"Yes, sir, if they are unselfish prayers."

"That brand is rather scarce, I take it," answered McMasters, but his tone was reflective rather than sarcastic.

"Oh, sir, I wish you would pray as I do. God would surely understand."

"Rather a queer request, Hiram. If my life depends upon your death no prayer shall ever pass my lips."

"But, sir, I'm an old——"

"However," interrupted McMasters, "I shall pray that if my life is spared in any other fashion, I will make full amends for my years of indifference and neglect. And, Hiram, no one knows how much I truly seek this divine dispensation. But I have always scoffed at death-bed confessions, and so my heart grows cold, for I have no right to ask—now." Again, wearily, "No right—now."

"Ah, master, God is plenteous in mercy. If you but have the faith, sir, it shall make you whole."

"Very good, had I lived as you have lived, Biggs." Then, after a pause, "Still, the cause is worthy, my heart is right and I shall approach the Throne. May God be merciful unto me, a sinner."

"I hope it is not too late yet," faltered Biggs. "Oh, if God would only call me

in your stead, that you might still do the good work that you find it in your heart to do, how gladly would I go."

A deep sigh was his only answer.

A LONG silence was finally broken by the sick man. But when he spoke, his voice was so strange and uncanny that the servant hastened close and peered anxiously into the fever-flushed face of the sufferer.

"Hiram—I must tell you—a secret," came in a laborious, almost sepulchral, whisper.

Biggs came closer.

"Bring a chair and sit down. I must talk to you."

As the old servant again leaned forward, the sufferer hesitated; then with an obvious effort he began.

"Hiram, I am going to give you some instructions which you must obey to the letter. Will you promise to keep them?"

"I swear it, sir," with great earnestness.

"Good! Now, if this fever seals my lips and the doctor pronounces me dead——"

"Please, sir," Biggs broke in, tears streaming down his furrowed cheeks, but his master continued in the same subdued voice, "Whatever happens, I am not to be embalmed—do you hear me?—not embalmed, but just laid away as I am now."

"Yes, sir," in a choked voice, which fully betrayed the breaking heart behind it.

"And now, Hiram, the rest of the secret." He paused and beckoned Biggs to lean closer.

"In my vault—in the mausoleum, I have had an electric button installed. That button connects with a silver bell. Lift up that small picture of Napoleon, there upon the wall."

His hands trembling as with the palsy, Biggs reached out and lifted aside the picture hanging near the head of the bed, and there revealed the silver bell, fitted into a small aperture in the wall. Then, with a sob, he fell back into his chair.

"Hiram"—in a whisper—"after they bury me, you are to sleep in this bed."

With a cry, the old man threw out a horrified, expostulating hand. Catching it feverishly, the banker half raised himself in bed.

"Don't you understand?" he cried fiercely. "I may not be dead after all. Remember grandfather! And Biggs—if that bell rings, get help—quick!"

Suddenly releasing his hold, McMasters fell back limply among the pillows.

ALL through the long night the faithful Biggs maintained a sleepless vigil, but the banker lay as immovable as a stone. When the rosy-cheeked dawn came peeping audaciously through the casements, Biggs drew the heavy curtains tightly shut once more.

Not until the doctor's motor whirled away did the patient rouse from his lethargy.

Apparently strengthened by his deep stupor he spoke, and Biggs stood instantly beside him.

"What did the doctor say?"

Biggs hesitated.

"Out with it, I'm no chicken-hearted weakling."

"Nothing much," admitted Biggs, sadly. "He only shook his head very gravely."

"He doesn't understand this family malady any more than the old quack who allowed my grandfather to be buried alive," said McMasters almost fiercely.

Biggs shuddered and put a trembling hand to his eyes.

"What ails me, Biggs?" almost plaintively. "No one knows. This fever has

baffled the scientists for years. When you fall into a comatose condition they call it suspended animation. That's the best thing they do—find names for diseases. My family doctor doesn't have any more of an idea about this malady than you or I. The average physician is just a guesser. He guesses you have a fever and prescribes a remedy, hoping that it will hit the spot. If it doesn't he looks wise, wags his head—and tries something else on you. Maybe it works and maybe it doesn't. The only thing my guesser is absolutely sure of is that if I live or if I die, he will collect a princely fee for his services."

Biggs remained statuesque during the pause.

"Gad," McMasters broke out again testily, "if I fiddled around in my business like that I'd be a pauper in a month."

"But the doctor says you're coming on," ventured Biggs.

"Sure he does," answered the banker with a sneer. "That's his stock in trade. I know that line of palaver. Secretly, he knows I am as liable to be dead as alive when he comes again."

"Oh, sir, you aren't going to die!"

"That's what I'm afraid of, Biggs. But they'll call me dead and go ahead and embalm me and make sure of it."

"Oh, sir, I wish——"

"Now remember, Biggs," broke in the sick man, "shoot the first undertaker that tries to put that mummy stuff in my veins."

"I understand perfectly, sir," answered Biggs, fearful lest the other's excitement might again give him a turn for the worse.

"I know I'm apparently going to pass away. My father and grandfather both had this cussed virus in their veins, and I don't believe either of them was dead when he was pronounced so!"

"Well, if by any chance—that is, if you," began Biggs desperately, "if you are apparently—dead—why not have them keep your body here in the house for a time?"

"Convention, formality, custom, hidebound law!" the banker fairly frothed. "The health authorities would come here with an army and see that I was buried. No, Biggs, I've got a fine crypt out there, all quiet and secure, good ventilation, electric lights, like a pullman berth—and a push-button. That precludes all notoriety. It's secret and safe. The electrician who installed the apparatus died four years ago. So you and I, alone, possess this knowledge."

"Don't you think someone else should know of it too? Your attorney, or——"

"No, Biggs. If I really am dead I don't want anyone to write up my eccentricities for some Sunday magazine sheet. And if I do come back, then it will be time to tell the gaping public about my cleverness."

"I wish you weren't so—so cold-blooded about it all, sir."

"I have always hit straight from the shoulder, Hiram, and I'm facing this death business as I'd face any other proposition. I'm not ready to cash in, and if I can cheat the doctors, undertakers, lawyers, heirs, and chief mourners for a few more years, I'm going to do it. And don't forget poor old granddad. He might have been up and about yet had he but used my scheme."

Biggs turned away, sick at heart. It was too terrible beyond words. To him his religion was as essential as daily bread. Death was the culmination of cherished belief and constant prayer. As his years declined he had faced the inevitable day with simple faith that when the

summons came he would go gladly, like him "who wraps the drapery of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams." With throbbing heart he listened for another torrent of words that would still further stab his sensitive soul; for he had loved and revered his master from his youth up.

But no words came. He wheeled about. The massive head had fallen limply among the pillows. Pallid lips were trying to form sentences without result. Then the great body seemed to subside immeasurably deeper into the covers and a death-like stillness fell upon the room.

Intuitively feeling that his master was worse than at any previous relapse, Biggs made every effort to revive him, gently at first, and then by vigorously shaking and calling to him in a heart-broken, piteous voice. But to no avail. The heavy figure looked pallid and corpse-like under the snowy sheets.

Long hours dragged by, and still the lonely old servant sat mutely beside the bed, only aroused, at last, by the peremptory, measured call of the telephone bell.

"Yes," said Biggs in a quavering voice. "Oh yes, Doctor Meredith, Master's resting easy. Don't think you'll need to come until tomorrow."

"I'll keep them away as long as I can," he muttered, as he slipped back to his vigil. "God grant—maybe he'll come back—and take up the work of the Master, so long delayed. Oh God! If Thou wouldst only take me in his stead!"

Sleeping fitfully, Biggs sat dumbly through an interminable night, but the new day brought no reassuring sign from the inert form. The stillness was appalling. The other servants were quartered in a distant part of the mansion and only came when summoned. Again Biggs assured the physician that he could gain nothing by calling, and another awful night found him, ashen and distraught, at the bedside. Sometime in the still watches he swooned and kindly nature patched up his shredded nerves, before consciousness once more aroused him. But the strain was more than he could bear. So when the anxious specialist came, unbidden, he found a shattered old watchman who broke down completely and babbled forth the whole mysterious tale, concealing nothing but the secret of the tomb.

In a coffin previously made to order, they laid the unembalmed remains of Judson McMasters in the family mausoleum, and the world which had felt his masterful presence for so many years paused long enough to lay a costly tribute on his bier and then went smoothly on its way.

Not so with the faithful Biggs. Ensconced in his master's bedroom, he nightly tossed in troubled sleep, filled with the jangling of innumerable electric bells. And when—on the tenth night, after he had been somewhat reassured that all was well—he was suddenly awakened by a mad, incessant ringing from the hidden alarm, a deathly weakness overcame him and it was some time before he was able to drag his palsied body from the bed. With fumbling, clumsy fingers he tried to hasten, but it was many minutes before he tottered, half dressed, out of the room. And as he did so, his heart almost stood still, then mounted to his throat as if to choke him.

"Biggs!"—a voice—McMaster's voice was calling.

He staggered to the head of the wide, massive stairway and looked down. There stood the banker, pale, emaciated, but smiling.

And then, as from an endless distance, came more words:

"I forgot to tell you that I had a trap-

door in the end of the casket. When you didn't answer the bell, I found I could come alone."

With an inarticulate cry, Biggs stretched out his trembling arms.

"My Master, I am coming now."

Then he swayed, stumbled, clutched feebly at the rail and plunged headlong to the foot of the stairs, a crumpled, lifeless form.

The Secret of Kralitz

By HENRY KUTTNER

A story of the shocking revelation that came to the twenty-first Baron Kralitz

I AWOKE from profound sleep to find two black-swathed forms standing silently beside me, their faces pale blurs in the gloom. As I blinked to clear my sleep-dimmed eyes, one of them beckoned impatiently, and suddenly I realized the purpose of this midnight summons. For years I had been expecting it, ever since my father, the Baron Kralitz, had revealed to me the secret and the curse that hung over our ancient house. And so, without a word, I rose and followed my guides as they led me along the gloomy corridors of the castle that had been my home since birth.

As I proceeded there rose up in my mind the stern face of my father, and in my ears rang his solemn words as he told me of the legendary curse of the House of Kralitz, the unknown secret that was imparted to the eldest son of each generation—at a certain time.

"When?" I had asked my father as he lay on his death-bed, fighting back the approach of dissolution.

"When you are able to understand," he had told me, watching my face intently from beneath his tufted white brows. "Some are told the secret sooner than others. Since the first Baron Kralitz the secret has been handed down——"

He clutched at his breast and paused. It was fully five minutes before he had gathered his strength to speak again in his rolling, powerful voice. No gasping, death-bed confessions for the Baron Kralitz!

He said at last, "You have seen the ruins of the old monastery near the village, Franz. The first Baron burnt it and put the monks to the sword. The Abbot interfered too often with the Baron's whims. A girl sought shelter and the Abbot refused to give her up at the Baron's demand. His patience was at an end—you know the tales they still tell about him.

"He slew the Abbot, burned the monastery, and took the girl. Before he died the Abbot cursed his slayer, and cursed his sons for unborn generations. And it is the nature of this curse that is the secret of our house.

"I may not tell you what the curse is.

Do not seek to discover it before it is revealed to you. Wait patiently, and in due time you will be taken by the warders of the secret down the stairway to the underground cavern. And then you will learn the secret of Kralitz."

As the last word passed my father's lips he died, his stern face still set in its harsh lines.

DEEP in my memories, I had not noticed our path, but now the dark forms of my guides paused beside a gap in the stone flagging, where a stairway which I had never seen during my wanderings about the castle led into subterranean depths. Down this stairway I was conducted, and presently I came to realize that there was light of a sort—a dim, phosphorescent radiance that came from no recognizable source, and seemed to be less actual light than the accustoming of my eyes to the near-darkness.

I went down for a long time. The stairway turned and twisted in the rock, and the bobbing forms ahead were my only relief from the monotony of the interminable descent. And at last, deep underground, the long stairway ended, and I gazed over the shoulders of my guides at the great door that barred my path. It was roughly chiseled from the solid stone, and upon it were curious and strangely disquieting carvings, symbols which I did not recognize. It swung open, and I passed through and paused, staring about me through a gray sea of mist.

I stood upon a gentle slope that fell away into the fog-hidden distance, from which came a pandemonium of muffled bellowing and high-pitched, shrill squeakings vaguely akin to obscene laughter. Dark, half-glimpsed shapes swam into sight through the haze and disappeared again, and great vague shadows swept overhead on silent wings. Almost beside me was a long rectangular table of stone, and at this table two score of men were seated, watching me from eyes that gleamed dully out of deep sockets. My two guides silently took their places among them.

And suddenly the thick fog began to lift. It was swept raggedly away on the breath of a chill wind. The far dim reaches of the cavern were revealed as the mist swiftly dissipated, and I stood silent in the grip of a mighty fear, and, strangely, an equally potent, unaccountable thrill of delight. A part of my mind seemed to ask, "What horror is this?" And another part whispered, "You know this place!"

But I could never have seen it before. If I had realized what lay far beneath the castle I could never have slept at night for the fear that would have obsessed me. For, standing silent with conflicting tides of horror and ecstasy racing through me, I saw the weird inhabitants of the underground world.

Demons, monsters, unnamable things! Nightmare colossi strode bellowing through the murk, and amorphous gray things like giant slugs walked upright on stumpy legs. Creatures of shapeless soft pulp, beings with flame-shot eyes scatterred over their misshapen bodies like fabled Argus, writhed and twisted there in the evil glow. Winged things that were not bats swooped and fluttered in the tenebrous air, whispering sibilantly—whispering in *human* voices.

Far away at the bottom of the slope I could see the chill gleam of water, a hidden, sunless sea. Shapes mercifully almost hidden by distance and the semi-darkness sported and cried, troubling the surface of the lake, the size of which I could only conjecture. And a flapping thing whose leathery wings stretched like a tent above my head swooped and hovered for a moment, staring with flam-

ing eyes, and then darted off and was lost in the gloom.

And all the while, as I shuddered with fear and loathing, within me was this evil glee—this voice which whispered, "You know this place! You belong here! Is it not good to be home?"

I glanced behind me. The great door had swung silently shut, and escape was impossible. And then pride came to my aid. I was a Kralitz. And a Kralitz would not acknowledge fear in the face of the devil himself!

I STEPPED forward and confronted the warders, who were still seated regarding me intently from eyes in which a smoldering fire seemed to burn. Fighting down an insane dread that I might find before me an array of fleshless skeletons, I stepped to the head of the table, where there was a sort of crude throne, and peered closely at the silent figure on my right.

It was no bare skull at which I gazed, but a bearded, deadly-pale face. The curved, voluptuous lips were crimson, looking almost rouged, and the dull eyes stared through me bleakly. Inhuman agony had etched itself in deep lines on the white face, and gnawing anguish smoldered in the sunken eyes. I cannot hope to convey the utter strangeness, the atmosphere of unearthliness that surrounded him, almost as palpable as the fetid tomb-stench that welled from his dark garments. He waved a black-swathed arm to the vacant seat at the head of the table, and I sat down.

This nightmare sense of unreality! I seemed to be in a dream, with a hidden part of my mind slowly waking from sleep into evil life to take command of my faculties. The table was set with old-fashioned goblets and trenchers such as had not been used for hundreds of years. There was meat on the trenchers, and red liquor in the jeweled goblets. A heady, overpowering fragrance swam up into my nostrils, mixed with the grave-smell of my companions and the musty odor of a dank and sunless place.

Every white face was turned to me, faces that seemed oddly familiar, although I did not know why. Each face was alike in its blood-red, sensual lips and its expression of gnawing agony, and burning black eyes like the abysmal pits of Tartarus stared at me until I felt the short hairs stir on my neck. But—I was a Kralitz! I stood up and said boldly in archaic German that somehow came familiarly from my lips, "I am Franz, twenty-first Baron Kralitz. What do you want with me?"

A murmur of approval went around the long table. There was a stir. From the foot of the board a huge bearded man arose, a man with a frightful scar that made the left side of his face a horror of healed white tissue. Again the odd thrill of familiarity ran through me; I had seen that face before, and vaguely I remembered looking at it through dim twilight.

The man spoke in the old guttural German. "We greet you, Franz, Baron Kralitz. We greet you and pledge you, Franz—and we pledge the House of Kralitz!"

With that he caught up the goblet before him and held it high. All along the long table the black-swathed ones arose, and each held high his jeweled cup, and pledged me. They drank deeply, savoring the liquor, and I made the bow custom demanded. I said, in words that sprang almost unbidden from my mouth:

"I greet you, who are the warders of the secret of Kralitz, and I pledge you in return."

All about me, to the farthermost reaches of the dim cavern, a hush fell, and the bellows and howlings, and the insane

tittering of the flying things, were no longer heard. My companions leaned expectantly toward me. Standing alone at the head of the board, I raised my goblet and drank. The liquor was heady, exhilarating, with a faintly brackish flavor.

And abruptly I knew why the pain-racked, ruined face of my companion had seemed familiar; I had seen it often among the portraits of my ancestors, the frowning, disfigured visage of the founder of the House of Kralitz that glared down from the gloom of the great hall. In that fierce white light of revelation I knew my companions for what they were; I recognized them, one by one, remembering their canvas counterparts. But there was a change! Like an impalpable veil, the stamp of ineradicable evil lay on the tortured faces of my hosts, strangely altering their features, so that I could not always be sure I recognized them. One pale, sardonic face reminded me of my father, but I could not be sure, so monstrously altered was its expression.

I was dining with my ancestors—the House of Kralitz!

My cup was still held high, and I drained it, for somehow the grim revelation was not entirely unexpected. A strange glow thrilled through my veins, and I laughed aloud for the evil delight that was in me. The others laughed too, a deep-throated merriment like the barking of wolves—tortured laughter from men stretched on the rack, mad laughter in hell! And all through the hazy cavern came the clamor of the devil's brood! Great figures that towered many spans high rocked with thundering glee, and the flying things tittered slyly overhead. And out over the vast expanse swept the wave of frightful mirth, until the half-seen things in the black waters sent out bellows that tore at my eardrums, and the unseen roof far overhead sent back roaring echoes of the clamor.

And I laughed with them, laughed insanely, until I dropped exhausted into my seat and watched the scarred man at the other end of the table as he spoke.

"You are worthy to be of our company, and worthy to eat at the same board. We have pledged each other, and you are one of us; we shall eat together."

And we fell to, tearing like hungry beasts at the succulent white meat in the jeweled trenchers. Strange monsters served us, and at a chill touch on my arm I turned to find a dreadful crimson thing, like a skinned child, refilling my goblet. Strange, strange and utterly blasphemous was our feast. We shouted and laughed and fed there in the hazy light, while all around us thundered the evil horde. There was hell beneath Castle Kralitz, and it held high carnival this night.

PRESENTLY we sang a fierce drinking-song, swinging the deep cups back and forth in rhythm with our shouted chant. It was an archaic song, but the obsolete words were no handicap, for I mouthed them as though they had been learned at my mother's knee. And at the thought of my mother a trembling and a weakness ran through me abruptly, but I banished it with a draft of the heady liquor.

Long, long we shouted and sang and caroused there in the great cavern, and after a time we arose together and trooped to where a narrow, high-arched bridge spanned the tenebrous waters of the lake. But I may not speak of what was at the other end of the bridge, nor of the unnamable things that I saw—and did! I learned of the fungoid, inhuman beings that dwell on far cold Yuggoth, of the cyclopean shapes that attend unsleeping Cthulhu in his submarine city, of the strange pleasures that the followers of leprous, subterranean Yog-Sothoth may

possess, and I learned, too, of the unbelievable manner in which Iod, the Source, is worshipped beyond the outer galaxies. I plumbed the blackest pits of hell and came back—laughing. I was one with the rest of those dark warders, and I joined them in the saturnalia of horror until the scarred man spoke to us again.

"Our time grows short," he said, his scarred and bearded white face like a gargoyle's in the half-light. "We must depart soon. But you are a true Kralitz, Franz, and we shall meet again, and feast again, and make merry for longer than you think. One last pledge!"

I gave it to him. "To the House of Kralitz! May it never fall!"

And with an exultant shout we drained the pungent dregs of the liquor.

Then a strange lassitude fell upon me. With the others I turned my back on the cavern and the shapes that pranced and bellowed and crawled there, and I went up through the carved stone portal. We filed up the stairs, up and up, endlessly, until at last we emerged through the gaping hole in the stone flags and proceeded, a dark, silent company, back through those interminable corridors. The surroundings began to grow strangely familiar, and suddenly I recognized them.

We were in the great burial vaults below the castle, where the Barons Kralitz were ceremoniously entombed. Each Baron had been placed in his stone casket in his separate chamber, and each chamber lay, like beads on a necklace, adjacent to the next, so that we proceeded from the farthermost tombs of the early Barons Kralitz toward the unoccupied vaults. By immemorial custom, each tomb lay bare, an empty mausoleum, until the time had come for its use, when the great stone coffin, with the memorial inscription carved upon it, would be carried to its place. It was fitting, indeed, for the secret of Kralitz to be hidden here.

Abruptly I realized that I was alone, save for the bearded man with the disfiguring scar. The others had vanished, and, deep in my thoughts, I had not missed them. My companion stretched out his black-swathed arm and halted my progress, and I turned to him questioningly. He said in his sonorous voice, "I must leave you now. I must go back to my own place." And he pointed to the way whence we had come.

I nodded, for I had already recognized my companions for what they were. I knew that each Baron Kralitz had been laid in his tomb, only to arise as a monstrous thing neither dead nor alive, to descend into the cavern below and take part in the evil saturnalia. I realized, too, that with the approach of dawn they had returned to their stone coffins, to lie in a death-like trance until the setting sun should bring brief liberation. My own occult studies had enabled me to recognize these dreadful manifestations.

I bowed to my companion and would have proceeded on my way to the upper parts of the castle, but he barred my path. He shook his head slowly, his scar hideous in the phosphorescent gloom.

I said, "May I not go yet?"

He stared at me with tortured, smoldering eyes that had looked into hell itself, and he pointed to what lay beside me, and in a flash of nightmare realization I knew the secret of the curse of Kralitz. There came to me the knowledge that made my brain a frightful thing in which shapes of darkness would ever swirl and scream; the dreadful comprehension of *when* each Baron Kralitz was initiated into the brotherhood of blood. I knew—*I knew*—that no coffin had ever been placed unoccupied in the tombs, and I read upon the stone sarcophagus at my feet the inscription that made my doom known to me—*my own name, "Franz, twenty-first Baron Kralitz."*

The Great Keinplatz Experiment

By A. CONAN DOYLE

OF ALL the sciences which have puzzled the sons of men, none had such an attraction for the learned Professor von Baumgarten as those which relate to psychology and the ill-defined relations between mind and matter. A celebrated anatomist, a profound chemist, and one of the first physiologists in Europe, it was a relief for him to turn from these subjects and bring his varied knowledge to bear upon the study of the soul and the mysterious relationship of spirits. At first, when as a young man he began to dip into the secrets of mesmerism, his mind seemed to be wandering in a strange land where all was chaos and darkness, save that here and there some great unexplainable and disconnected fact loomed out in front of him. As the years passed, however, and as the worthy professor's stock of knowledge increased, for knowledge begets knowledge as money bears interest, much which had seemed strange and unaccountable began to take another shape in his eyes. New trains of reasoning became familiar to him, and he perceived connecting links where all had been incomprehensible and startling. By experiments which extended over twenty years, he obtained a basis of facts upon which it was his ambition to build up a new exact science which should embrace mesmerism, spiritualism, and all cognate subjects. In this he was much helped by his intimate knowledge of the more intricate parts of animal physiology which treat of nerve currents and the working of the brain; for Alexis von Baumgarten was regius professor of physiology at the University of Keinplatz, and had all the resources of the laboratory to aid him in his profound researches.

Professor von Baumgarten was tall and thin, with a hatchet-face and steel-gray eyes, which were singularly bright and penetrating. Much thought had furrowed his forehead and contracted his heavy eyebrows, so that he appeared to wear "a perpetual frown, which often misled people as to his character; for though astute he was tender-hearted. He

was popular among the students, who would gather round him after his lectures and listen eagerly to his strange theories. Often he would call for volunteers from among them in order to conduct some experiment, so that eventually there was hardly a lad in the class who had not, at one time or another, been thrown into a mesmeric trance by his professor.

Of all these young devotees of science there was none who equaled in enthusiasm Fritz von Hartmann. It had often seemed strange to his fellow students that wild, reckless Fritz, as dashing a young fellow as ever hailed from the Rhinelands, should devote the time and trouble which he did in reading up abstruse works and in assisting the professor in his strange experiments. The fact was, however, that Fritz was a knowing and long-headed fellow. Months before, he had lost his heart to young Elise, the blue-eyed, yellow-haired daughter of the lecturer. Although he had succeeded in learning from her lips that she was not indifferent to his suit, he had never dared to announce himself to her family as a formal suitor. Hence he would have found it a difficult matter to see his young lady had he not adopted the expedient of making himself useful to the professor. By this means he frequently was asked to the old man's house, where he willingly submitted to be experimented upon in any way as long as there was a chance of his receiving one bright glance from the eyes of Elise or one touch of her little hand.

Young Fritz von Hartmann was a handsome lad enough. There were broad acres, too, which would descend to him when his father died. To many he would have seemed an eligible suitor; but Madam frowned upon his presence in the house, and lectured the professor at times on his allowing such a wolf to prowl around their lamb. To tell the truth, Fritz had an evil name in Keinplatz. Never was there a riot or duel, or any other mischief afoot, but the young Rhinelander figured as a ringleader in it. No one used more free and violent language, no one drank more, no one played cards more habitually, no one was more idle, save in the one solitary subject. No wonder, then, that the good *Frau Professorin* gathered her *fräulein* under her wing, and resented the attentions of such a *mauvais sujet*. As to the worthy lecturer, he was too much engrossed by his strange studies to form an opinion upon the subject one way or the other.

For many years there was one question which had continually obtruded itself upon his thoughts. All his experiments and his theories turned upon a single point. A hundred times a day the professor asked himself whether it was possible for the human spirit to exist apart from the body for a time and then to return to it once again. When the possibility first suggested itself to him his scientific mind had revolted from it. It clashed too violently with preconceived ideas and the prejudices of his early training. Gradually, however, as he proceeded farther and farther along the pathway of original research, his mind shook off its old fetters and became ready to face any conclusion which could reconcile the facts. There were many things which made him believe that it was possible for mind to exist apart from matter. At last it occurred to him that by a daring and original experiment the question might be definitely decided.

"It is evident," he remarked in his celebrated article upon invisible entities, which appeared in the *Keinplatz Wochenliche Medicalschrift* about this time, and which surprized the whole

scientific world—"it is evident that under certain conditions the soul or mind does separate itself from the body. In the case of a mesmerized person, the body lies in a cataleptic condition, but the spirit has left it. Perhaps you reply that the soul is there, but in a dormant condition. I answer that this is not so, otherwise how can one account for the condition of clairvoyance, which has fallen into disrepute through the knavery of certain scoundrels, but which can easily be shown to be an undoubted fact?

"I have been able myself, with a sensitive subject, to obtain an accurate description of what was going on in another room or another house. How can such knowledge be accounted for on any hypothesis save that the soul of the subject has left the body and is wandering through space? For a moment it is recalled by the voice of the operator and says what it has seen, and then wings its way once more through the air. Since the spirit is by its very nature invisible, we cannot see these comings and goings, but we see their effect in the body of the subject, now rigid and inert, now struggling to narrate impressions which could never have come to it by natural means.

"There is only one way which I can see by which the fact can be demonstrated. Although we in the flesh are unable to see these spirits, yet our own spirits, could we separate them from the body, would be conscious of the presence of others. It is my intention, therefore, shortly to mesmerize one of my pupils. I shall then mesmerize myself in a manner which has become easy to me. After that, if my theory holds good, my spirit will have no difficulty in meeting and communing with the spirit of my pupil, both being separated from the body. I hope to be able to communicate the result of this interesting experiment in an early number of the *Keinplatz Wochenliche Medicalschrift.*"

When the good professor finally fulfilled his promise, and published an account of what occurred, the narrative was so extraordinary that it was received with general incredulity. The tone of some of the papers was so offensive in their comments upon the matter that the angry savant declared that he would never open his mouth again or refer to the subject in any way—a promise which he has faithfully kept. This narrative has been compiled, however, from the most authentic sources, and the events cited in it may be relied upon as substantially correct.

It happened, then, that shortly after the time when Professor von Baumgarten conceived the idea of the above-mentioned experiment, he was walking thoughtfully homeward after a long day in the laboratory, when he met a crowd of roystering students who had just streamed out from a beer-house. At the head of them, half intoxicated and very noisy, was young Fritz von Hartmann. The professor would have passed them, but his pupil ran across and intercepted him.

"Heh! my worthy master," he said, taking the old man by the sleeve, and leading him down the road with him. "There is something that I have to say to you, and it is easier for me to say it now, when the good beer is humming in my head, than at another time."

"What is it, then, Fritz?" the physiologist asked, looking at him in mild surprize.

"I hear, *mein Herr,* that you are about to do some wondrous experiment in which you hope to take a man's soul out of his body, and then to put it back again. Is it not so?"

"It is true, Fritz."

"And have you considered, my dear sir, that you may have some difficulty in finding someone on whom to try this? *Potztausend!* Suppose that the soul went out and would not come back. That would be a bad business. Who is to take the risk?"

"But, Fritz," the professor cried, very much startled by this view of the matter, "I had relied upon your assistance in the attempt. Surely you will not desert me. Consider the honor and glory."

"Consider the fiddlesticks!" the student cried angrily. "Am I to be paid always thus? Did I not stand two hours upon a glass insulator while you poured electricity into my body? Have you not stimulated my phrenic nerves, besides ruining my digestion with a galvanic current round my stomach? Four-and-thirty times you have mesmerized me, and what have I got from all this? Nothing. And now you wish to take my soul out, as you would take the works from a watch. It is more than flesh and blood can stand."

"Dear, dear!" the professor cried in great distress. "That is very true, Fritz. I never thought of it before. If you can but suggest how I can compensate you, you will find me ready and willing."

"Then listen," said Fritz, solemnly. "If you will pledge your word that after this experiment I may have the hand of your daughter, then I am willing to assist you; but if not, I shall have nothing to do with it. These are my only terms."

"And what would my daughter say to this?" the professor exclaimed, after a pause of astonishment.

"Elise would welcome it," the young man replied. "We have loved each other long."

"Then she shall be yours," the physiologist said with decision, "for you are a good-hearted young man, and one of the best neurotic subjects that I have ever known—that is when you are not under the influence of alcohol. My experiment is to be performed upon the fourth of next month. You will attend at the physiological laboratory at twelve o'clock. It will be a great occasion, Fritz. Von Gruben is coming from Jena, and Hinterstein from Basle. The chief men of science of all South Germany will be there."

"I shall be punctual," the student said, briefly; and so the two parted.

The professor did not exaggerate when he spoke of the widespread interest excited by his novel psychophysiological experiment. Long before the hour had arrived the room was filled with a galaxy of talent. Besides the celebrities whom he had mentioned, there had come from London the great Professor Lurcher, who had just established his reputation by a remarkable treatise upon cerebral centers. Several great lights of the Spiritualistic body had also come a long distance to be present, as had a Swedenborgian minister, who considered that the proceedings might throw some light upon the doctrines of the Rosy Cross.

There was considerable applause from this eminent assembly upon the appearance of Professor von Baumgarten and his subject upon the platform. The lecturer, in a few well-chosen words, explained what his views were, and how he proposed to test them.

"I hold," he said, "that when a person is under the influence of mesmerism, his spirit is for the time released from his body, and I challenge anyone to put forward any other hypothesis which will account for the fact of clairvoyance. I therefore hope that upon mesmerizing my young friend here, and then putting myself into a trance, our spirits may be able to commune together, though our

bodies lie still and inert. After a time nature will resume her sway, our spirits will return into our respective bodies, and all will be as before. With your kind permission, we shall now proceed to attempt the experiment."

The applause was renewed at this speech, and the audience settled down in expectant silence. With a few rapid passes the professor mesmerized the young man, who sank back in his chair, pale and rigid. He then took a bright globe of glass from his pocket, and by concentrating his gaze upon it and making a strong mental effort, he succeeded in throwing himself into the same condition. It was a strange and impressive sight to see the old man and the young sitting together in the same cataleptic state. Whither, then, had their souls fled? That was the question which presented itself to each and every one of the spectators.

Five minutes passed, and then ten, and then fifteen, and then fifteen more, while the professor and his pupil sat stiff and stark upon the platform. During that time not a sound was heard from the assembled savants, but every eye was bent upon the two pale faces, in search of the first signs of returning consciousness.

Nearly an hour had elapsed before the patient watchers were rewarded. A faint flush came back to the cheeks of Professor von Baumgarten. The soul was coming back once more to its earthly tenement. Suddenly he stretched out his long thin arms, as one awaking from sleep, and rubbing his eyes, stood up from his chair and gazed about him as though he hardly realized where he was.

"Tausend Teufel!" he exclaimed, rapping out a tremendous South German oath, to the great astonishment of his audience and to the disgust of the Swedenborgian. "Where the *Henker* am I then, and what in thunder has occurred? Oh, yes, I remember now. One of these nonsensical mesmeric experiments. There is no result this time, for I remember nothing at all since I became unconscious; so you have had all your long journeys for nothing, my learned friends, and a very good joke, too;" at which the regius professor of physiology burst into a roar of laughter and slapped his thigh in a highly indecorous fashion.

The audience were so enraged at this unseemly behavior on the part of their host, that there might have been a considerable disturbance, had it not been for the judicious interference of young Fritz von Hartmann, who had now recovered from his lethargy. Stepping to the front of the platform, the young man apologized for the conduct of his companion.

"I am sorry to say," he said, "that he is a harum-scarum sort of fellow, although he appeared so grave at the commencement of this experiment. He is still suffering from mesmeric reaction, and is hardly accountable for his words. As to the experiment itself, I do not consider it to be a failure. It is very possible that our spirits may have been communing in space during this hour; but, unfortunately, our gross bodily memory is distinct from our spirit, and we cannot recall what has occurred. My energies shall now be devoted to devising some means by which spirits may be able to recollect what occurs to them in their free state, and I trust that when I have worked this out, I may have the pleasure of meeting you all once again in this hall, and demonstrating to you the result."

This address, coming from so young a student, caused considerable astonishment among the audience, and some were inclined to be offended, thinking that he assumed rather too much importance. The majority, however, looked upon him as a young man of great promise, and many comparisons were made as they left

the hall between his dignified conduct and the levity of his professor, who during the above remarks was laughing heartily in a corner, by no means abashed at the failure of the experiment.

Now although all these learned men were filing out of the lecture-room under the impression that they had seen nothing of note, as a matter of fact one of the most wonderful things in the whole history of the world had just occurred before their very eyes. Professor von Baumgarten had been so far correct in his theory that both his spirit and that of his pupil had been for a time absent from his body. But here a strange and unforeseen complication had occurred. In their return the spirit of Fritz von Hartmann had entered into the body of Alexis von Baumgarten, and that of Alexis von Baumgarten had taken up its abode in the frame of Fritz von Hartmann. Hence the slang and scurrility which issued from the lips of the serious professor, and hence also the weighty words and grave statements which fell from the careless student. It was an unprecedented event, yet no one knew of it, least of all those whom it concerned.

The body of the professor, feeling conscious suddenly of a great dryness about the back of the throat, sallied out into the street, still chuckling to himself over the result of the experiment, for the soul of Fritz within was reckless at the thought of the bride whom he had won so easily. His first impulse was to go up to the house and see her, but on second thoughts he came to the conclusion that it would be best to stay until Madam Baumgarten should be informed by her husband of the agreement which had been made. He therefore made his way down to the Grüner Mann, which was one of the favorite trysting-places of the wilder students, and ran, boisterously waving his cane in the air, into the little parlor, where sat Spiegler and Müller, and half a dozen other boon companions.

"Ha, ha! my boys," he shouted. "I knew I should find you here. Drink up, every one of you, and call for what you like; I'm going to stand treat today."

Had the green man who is depicted upon the sign-post of that well-known inn suddenly marched into the room and called for a bottle of wine, the students could not have been more amazed than they were by this unexpected entry of their revered professor. They were so astonished that for a minute or two they glared at him in utter bewilderment without being able to make any reply to his hearty invitation.

"Donner und Blitzen!" shouted the professor, angrily. "What the deuce is the matter with you, then? You sit there like a set of stuck pigs staring at me. What is it, then?"

"It is the unexpected honor," stammered Spiegel, who was in the chair.

"Honor—rubbish!" said the professor, testily. "Do you think that just because I happen to have been exhibiting mesmerism to a parcel of old fossils, I am therefore too proud to associate with dear old friends like you? Come out of that chair, Spiegel, my boy, for I shall preside now. Beer, or wine, or schnapps, my lads —call for what you like, and put it all down to me."

Never was there such an afternoon in the Grüner Mann. The foaming flagons of lager and the green-necked bottle of Rhenish circulated merrily. By degrees the students lost their shyness in the presence of their professor. As for him, he shouted, he sang, he roared, he balanced a long tobacco-pipe upon his nose, and offered to run a hundred yards against any member of the company. The *kellner* and the bar-maid whispered to each other outside the door their astonishment at

such proceedings on the part of a regius professor of the ancient university of Keinplatz. They had still more to whisper about afterward, for the learned man cracked the *kellner's* crown, and kissed the bar-maid behind the kitchen door.

"Gentlemen," said the professor, standing up, albeit somewhat totteringly, at the end of the table, and balancing his high, old-fashioned wine-glass in his bony hand, "I must now explain to you what is the cause of this festivity."

"Hear! hear!" roared the students, hammering their beer-glasses against the table; "a speech, a speech—silence for a speech!"

"The fact is, my friends," said the professor, beaming through his spectacles, "I hope very soon to be married."

"Married?" cried a student, bolder than the others. "Is Madam dead, then?"

"Madam who?"

"Why, Madam von Baumgarten, of course."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the professor; "I can see, then, that you know all about my former difficulties. No, she is not dead, but I have reason to believe that she will not oppose my marriage."

"That is very accommodating of her," remarked one of the company.

"In fact," said the professor, "I hope that she will now be induced to aid me in getting a wife. She and I never took to each other very much; but now I hope all that may be ended, and when I marry she will come and stay with me."

"What a happy family!" exclaimed some wag.

"Yes, indeed; and I hope you will come to my wedding, all of you. I won't mention names, but here is to my little bride!" and the professor waved his glass in the air.

"Here's to his little bride!" roared the roysterers, with shouts of laughter. "Here's her health. *Sie soll leben—hoch!*" And so the fun waxed still more fast and furious, while each young fellow followed the professor's example, and drank a toast to the girl of his heart.

While all this festivity had been going on at the Grüner Mann, a very different scene had been enacted elsewhere. Young Fritz von Hartmann, with a solemn face and a reserved manner, had, after the experiment, consulted and adjusted some mathematical instruments; after which, with a few peremptory words to the janitors, he had walked out into the street and wended his way slowly in the direction of the house of the professor. As he walked he saw von Althaus, the professor of anatomy, in front of him, and quickening his pace he overtook him.

"I say, von Althaus," he exclaimed, tapping him on the sleeve, "you were asking me for some information the other day concerning the middle coat of the cerebral arteries. Now I find——"

"Donnerwetter!" shouted von Althaus, who was a peppery old fellow. "What the deuce do you mean by your impertinence? I'll have you up before the Academical Senate for this, sir;" with which threat he turned on his heel and hurried away.

Von Hartmann was much surprized at this reception. "It's on account of this failure of my experiment," he said to himself, and continued moodily on his way.

Fresh surprizes were in store for him, however. He was hurrying along when he was overtaken by two students. These youths, instead of raising their caps or showing any other sign of respect, gave a wild whoop of delight the instant that they saw him, and rushing at him, seized him by each arm and commenced dragging him along with them.

"Gott in Himmel!" roared von Hartmann. "What is the meaning of this un-

paralleled insult? Where are you taking me?"

"To crack a bottle of wine with us," said the two students. "Come along! That is an invitation which you have never refused."

"I never heard of such insolence in my life!" cried von Hartmann. "Let go my arms! I shall certainly have you rusticated for this. Let me go, I say!" and he kicked furiously at his captors.

"Oh, if you choose to turn ill-tempered, you may go where you like," the students said, releasing him. "We can do very well without you."

"I know you! I'll pay you out!" said von Hartmann furiously, and continued in the direction which he imagined to be his own home, much incensed at the two episodes which had occurred to him on the way.

Now, Madam von Baumgarten, who was looking out of the window and wondering why her husband was late for dinner, was considerably astonished to see the young student come stalking down the road. As already remarked, she had a great antipathy to him, and if ever he ventured into the house it was on sufferance, and under the protection of the professor. Still more astonished was she, therefore, when she beheld him undo the wicket-gate and stride up the garden path with the air of one who is master of the situation. She could hardly believe her eyes, and hastened to the door with all her maternal instincts up in arms. From the upper windows the fair Elise had also observed this daring move upon the part of her lover, and her heart beat quick with mingled pride and consternation.

"Good-day, sir," Madam Baumgarten remarked to the intruder, as she stood in gloomy majesty in the open doorway.

"A very fine day indeed, Martha," returned the other. "Now, don't stand there like a statue of Juno, but bustle

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about and get the dinner ready, for I am well-nigh starved."

"Martha! Dinner!" ejaculated the lady, falling back in astonishment.

"Yes, dinner, Martha, dinner!" howled von Hartmann, who was becoming irritable. "Is there anything wonderful in that request when a man has been out all day? I'll wait in the dining-room. Anything will do. Schinken, and sausage, and prunes—any little thing that happens to be about. There you are, standing staring again. Woman, will you or will you not stir your legs?"

This last address, delivered with a perfect shriek of rage, had the effect of sending good Madam Baumgarten flying along the passage and through the kitchen, where she locked herself up in the scullery and went into violent hysterics. In the meantime von Hartmann strode into the room and threw himself down upon the sofa in the worst of tempers.

"Elise!" he shouted. "Confound the girl! Elise!"

Thus roughly summoned, the young lady came timidly downstairs and into the presence of her lover.

"Dearest!" she cried, throwing her arms round him, "I know this is all done for my sake! It is a ruse in order to see me."

Von Hartmann's indignation at this fresh attack upon him was so great that he became speechless for a minute from rage, and could only glare and shake his fists, while he struggled in her embrace. When he at last regained his utterance, he indulged in such a bellow of passion that the young lady dropped back, petrified with fear, into an armchair.

"Never have I passed such a day in my life," von Hartmann cried, stamping upon the floor. "My experiment has failed. Von Althaus has insulted me. Two students have dragged me along the public road. My wife nearly faints when I ask her for dinner, and my daughter flies at me and hugs me like a grizzly bear."

"You are ill, dear," the young lady cried. "Your mind is wandering. You have not even kissed me once."

"No, and I don't intend to, either," von Hartmann said with decision. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Why don't you go and fetch my slippers, and help your mother to dish the dinner?"

"And is it for this," Elise cried, burying her face in her handkerchief—"is it for this that I have loved you passionately for upward of ten months? Is it for this that I have braved my mother's wrath? Oh, you have broken my heart; I am sure you have!" and she sobbed hysterically.

"I can't stand much more of this," roared von Hartmann furiously. "What the deuce does the girl mean? What did I do ten months ago which inspired you with such a particular affection for me? If you are really so very fond, you would do better to run down and find the schinken and some bread, instead of talking all this nonsense."

"Oh, my darling!" cried the unhappy maiden, throwing herself into the arms of what she imagined to be her lover, "you do but joke in order to frighten your little Elise."

Now it chanced that at the moment of this unexpected embrace von Hartmann was still leaning back against the end of the sofa, which, like much German furniture, was in a somewhat rickety condition. It also chanced that beneath this end of the sofa there stood a tank full of water in which the physiologist was conducting certain experiments upon the ova of fish, and which he kept in his drawing-room in order to insure an equable temperature. The additional weight of the maiden, combined with the impetus with which she hurled herself

upon him, caused the precarious piece of furniture to give way, and the body of the unfortunate student was hurled backward into the tank, in which his head and shoulders were firmly wedged, while his lower extremities flapped helplessly about in the air. This was the last straw. Extricating himself with some difficulty from his unpleasant position, von Hartmann gave an inarticulate yell of fury, and dashing out of the room, in spite of the entreaties of Elise, he seized his hat and rushed off into the town, all dripping and disheveled, with the intention of seeking in some inn the food and comfort which he could not find at home.

As the spirit of von Baumgarten, encased in the body of von Hartmann, strode down the winding pathway which led down to the little town, brooding angrily over his many wrongs, he became aware that an elderly man was approaching him who appeared to be in an advanced state of intoxication. Von Hartmann waited by the side of the road and watched this individual, who came stumbling along, reeling from one side of the road to the other, and singing a student song in a very husky and drunken voice. At first his interest was merely excited by the fact of seeing a man of so venerable an appearance in such a disgraceful condition, but as he approached nearer he became convinced that he knew the other well, though he could not recall when or where he had met him. This impression became so strong with him, that when the stranger came abreast of him he stepped in front of him and took a good look at his features.

"Well, sonny," said the drunken man, surveying von Hartmann, and swaying about in front of him, "where the *Henker* have I seen you before? I know you as well as I know myself. Who the deuce are you?"

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"I am Professor von Baumgarten," said the student. "May I ask who you are? I am strangely familiar with your features."

"You should never tell lies, young man," said the other. "You're certainly not the professor, for he is an ugly snuffy old chap, and you are a big broad-shouldered young fellow. As to myself, I am Fritz von Hartmann, at your service."

"That you certainly are not!" exclaimed the body of von Hartmann. "You might very well be his father. But hullo, sir, are you aware that you are wearing my studs and my watch-chain?"

"Donnerwetter!" hiccuped the other. "If those are not the trousers for which my tailor is about to sue me, may I never taste beer again!"

Now as von Hartmann, overwhelmed by the many strange things which had occurred to him that day, passed his hand over his forehead and cast his eyes downward, he chanced to catch the reflection of his own face in a pool which the rain had left upon the road. To his utter astonishment he perceived that his face was that of a youth, that his dress was that of a fashionable young student, and that in every way he was the antithesis of the grave and scholarly figure in which his mind was wont to dwell. In an instant his active brain ran over the series of events which had occurred and sprang to the conclusion. He fairly reeled under the blow.

"Himmel!" he cried, "I see it all. Our souls are in the wrong bodies. I am you and you are I. My theory is proved—but at what an expense! Is the most scholarly mind in Europe to go about with this frivolous exterior? Oh, the labors of a lifetime are ruined!" and he smote his breast in his despair.

"I say," remarked the real von Hartmann from the body of the professor, "I quite see the force of your remarks, but don't go knocking my body about like that. You received it in excellent condition, but I perceive you have wet it and bruised it, and spilled snuff over my ruffled shirt-front."

"It matters little," the other said, moodily. "Such as we are, so must we stay. My theory is triumphantly proved, but the cost is terrible."

"If I thought so," said the spirit of the student, "it would be hard indeed. What could I do with these stiff old limbs, and how could I woo Elise and persuade her that I was not her father? No, thank heaven, in spite of the beer which has upset me more than it ever could upset my real self, I can see a way out of it."

"How?" gasped the professor.

"Why, by repeating the experiment. Liberate our souls once more, and the chances are that they will find their way back into their respective bodies."

No drowning man could clutch more eagerly at a straw than did von Baumgarten's spirit at this suggestion. In feverish haste he dragged his own frame to the side of the road and threw it into a mesmeric trance; he then extracted the crystal ball from the pocket, and managed to bring himself into the same condition.

Some students and peasants who chanced to pass during the next hour were much astonished to see the worthy professor of physiology and his favorite student both sitting upon a very muddy bank and both completely insensible. Before the hour was up quite a crowd had assembled, and they were discussing the advisability of sending for an ambulance to convey the pair to a hospital, when the learned savant opened his eyes and gazed vacantly around him. For an instant he seemed to forget how he had come there, but next moment he astonished his audi-

ence by waving his skinny arms above his head and crying out in a voice of rapture, *"Gott sei gedankt! I am myself again! I feel I am!"* Nor was the amazement lessened when the student, springing to his feet, burst into the same cry, and the two performed a sort of *pas de joie* in the middle of the road.

For some time after that people had some suspicion of the sanity of both the actors in this strange episode. When the professor published his experiences in the *Medicalschrift* as he had promised, he was met by an intimation, even from his colleagues, that he would do well to have his mind cared for, and that another such publication would certainly consign him to a madhouse. The student also found it wisest to be silent about the matter.

When the worthy lecturer returned home that night he did not receive the cordial welcome which he might have looked for after his strange adventures. On the contrary, he was roundly upbraided by both his female relatives for smelling of drink and tobacco, and also for being absent while a young scapegrace invaded the house and insulted its occupants.

It was long before the domestic atmosphere of the lecturer's house resumed its normal quiet, and longer still before the genial face of von Hartmann was seen beneath its roof. Perseverance, however, conquers every obstacle, and the student eventually succeeded in pacifying the enraged ladies and in establishing himself upon the old footing. He has now no longer any cause to fear the enmity of Madam, for he is Hauptmann von Hartmann of the Emperor's own Uhlans, and his loving wife Elise has already presented him with two little Uhlans as a visible sign and token of her affection.

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THE tragic death of Robert E. Howard has called forth a chorus of praise from discerning critics who have appreciated the genuine literary value of his work. H. P. Lovecraft, one of the acknowledged masters of weird fiction, whose keenly analytical mind has started many young writers on literary careers, makes the following comment on Howard's work: "Howard's death forms weird fiction's worst blow since the passing of good old Canevin [Henry S. Whitehead] in 1932. Scarcely anybody else in the pulp field had quite the driving zest and spontaneity of Robert E. Howard. He put himself into everything he wrote—and even when he made outward concessions to pulp standards he had a wholly unique inner force and sincerity which broke through the surface and placed the stamp of his personality on the ultimate product. How he could surround primal megalithic cities with an aura of æon-old fear and necromancy! And his recent *Black Canaan* (WT's best story in the last three or so issues) is likewise magnificent in a more realistic way—reflecting a genuine regional background and giving a clutchingly powerful picture of the horror that stalks through the moss-hung, shadow-cursed, serpent-ridden swamps of the farther South. Others' efforts seem pallid by contrast. Weird fiction certainly has occasion to mourn."

To which E. Hoffmann Price, the only WEIRD TALES author who knew Howard personally, adds: "I know of few people whose sudden death would be such a savage kick on the chin. Lovecraft says it is the saddest blow to writers since the death of Henry S. Whitehead—and I answer, saying, 'Be damned to writing—it's a lot worse blow to anyone who knew Bob and his parents.' Bob Howard was as complex and likable a character as one would meet in many a long day's march. There is going to be much wailing among the fantasy fans, and just as much among those who read only Howard's vivid action stories in other books—but the heaviest of it is coming from those who met him in his native territory."

Howard wrote his own epitaph shortly before his death, when he typed the following couplet, the second line of which is taken from the well-known poem by Ernest Dowson:

> All fled—all done, so lift me on the pyre;
> The Feast is over and the lamps expire.

Conan's Strange Lands

Irvin T. Gould, of Philadelphia, writes: "It may be rather late to mention it, but your May issue of WEIRD TALES is the best collection of stories I have ever seen between your front and back covers. *Child of the Winds* and *The Room of Shadows* top a splendid collection of weird tales. . . . Glad to hear that Robert E. Howard is coming to the fore with another Conan story. I was afraid the rascally old barbarian was going to sink down in slothful ease upon the Aquilonian throne and not furnish R. E. H. with any more weird adventure material, but I guess you can't keep that wild Cimmerian blood quiet; so more power to him. I can't take enough space to give bouquets to all that rate it, so I have just mentioned those that have particularly impressed me. Bring on that Conan story. I'm all agog. Couldn't you prevail upon Mr. Howard to furnish us a map of all those strange lands that have felt the swish of that Cimmerian sword? Or would that be in keeping with a weird tale? I leave it to you." [Mr. Howard prepared a map showing the strange lands visited by Conan, when he wrote that superb weird

novel, *The Hour of the Dragon.*—THE EDITOR.]

The Falling Method

Corwin Stickney, Jr., of Belleville, New Jersey, writes: "The July issue is excellent. I rank it second only to the April issue when rating the seven published so far this year. *Lost Paradise* and *Necromancy in Naat* are in a virtual tie for this month's honors. Moore is practically unbeatable, while Clark Ashton Smith's work is always of the finest quality. Since each of these two stories is so different from the other, both in theme and in the style in which it was written, I do not undertake to evaluate one above the other. Let it suffice to say that I enjoyed both hugely, and would appreciate nothing more than a story by each of them in each issue. Ronal Kayser constructed a vivid, stirring story in *The Unborn.* Seldom have I read one more fascinating. Edmond Hamilton disappointed me with *When the World Slept.* It was entirely too obvious; I hadn't read two pages before I had guessed the story's outcome. I cannot at all understand how this yarn can possibly be called weird. It might pass—on a dark night—as science-fiction. But weird fiction—never! The other tales are good, especially *Loot of the Vampire* and *The Return of Sarah Purcell.* I haven't yet read the new serial or the reprint. . . . Peculiar thing: three of the victims in this month's stories—in *The Return of Sarah Purcell, The Unborn,* and *Kharu Knows All,* to be exact—'got theirs' by way of the falling method—either by jumping out a window or by falling down a flight of stairs, as in the case of Emma in *The Return of Sarah Purcell.* I wonder how many discerning readers will notice that Tim Carewe (in *Kharu Knows All*) chose Kharu as his new name because it and his real name, Carewe, are phonetically alike."

French Phrases

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, contributes the following comments: "Now I'm gonna unload something from my mind that's been rankling me for yars 'n' yars. So often in stories one runs across French phrases, and it is taken for granted the reader knows what they mean, so no explanation is offered. All well and good. However, when one uses a sprinkling of other foreign phrases, unless the author offers translations immediately

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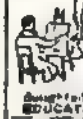

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after, a great hue and cry arises, a clamorous howl of derision is sent up by the readers, telling the writer to remember this is America and to speak United States. (I've had experience in the above matter after introducing German into a manuscript during high school days.) So!!! Now for the benefit of the readers who are ignorant of Français, either by choice or otherwise (or am I the only one who does not know the language?), is it too much to ask the writers to pen a few words extra of translation? For instance—'*Wie gehts*—How goes it?' 'Taint so much work now—is it? And if I see much more of that French rubbish, I'm gonna hie me down to your editorial offices and rub those writers' noses in a few German verbs and tenses! And now for a placid comment on the bizarre and unusual: I am getting to like Clark Ashton Smith better 'n' better—his stories are acquiring a strangeness new to his former tales; e. g.—*Necromancy in Naat.* A new land, a new fate to befall victims of the wizards, braving a similarity to *Zombie*—but so utterly different—more repellent. And the ending pleased me—the hero didn't vanquish the villain, nor did he escape his doom and save his fair lady. Yessir, Mr. Smith, you are pleasing me mightily of late. The verse, *Hagar,* by Edgar Daniel Kramer, wasn't half bad. He completes in a few breathless lines a story that is deeply imbedded within us all—fear of dark forests—fear of lurking, nameless unknown horrors, fear of natural phenomena that assume the grotesqueness of fearsome legendary spawns of other worlds. Ah me—I am so happy! Conan is grand, recalling former tales of men and dragons—Siegfried of the *Nibelungenlied* (now I s'pose someone wants to know what that means!)—St. George and his dragon—countless others—every nation has such a hero. I dunno as yet where the *Red Nails* come in, but my! it's exciting already; strange, possibly unexplored places. Goody—I'm just so-o-o happy. I could gurgle! Robert E. Howard gave the readers of WT one of the finest, most lovable brutes of a hero anyone could want. Conan is the embodiment of the kind of man everyone admires: strength and nerve to please the men; physique—*wunderbar!* to please the ladies. Enough rawness to be yet a barbarian and still experience enough to be better educated than the majority of those he encounters. He has a mind strong enough to throw off the spells of wizards. He is a fighter, adventurer, explorer and lover—a real he-man. Mr. Howard is indeed a clever man! . . . *Loot of the Vampire* certainly put a new angle on vampires. I was well-satisfied with the whole story. . . . I note you stated my letter in the July issue was entertaining. I am complimented and trust that all my letters may be even more so. *Auf wiederschreiben.*"

The Unborn

John V. Baltadonis, of Philadelphia, writes: "Well—I wasn't disappointed in the least bit; *Loot of the Vampire* certainly had a swell ending. That was a peach of a yarn. However, it didn't quite take the cake, so to speak, Ronal Kayser's story, *The Unborn,* nosing it out. *The Unborn* certainly had a new idea. For that reason and because it was well written, I give it first place in the July issue. This story is certainly a great step from *The Albino Deaths.* Clark Ashton Smith's yarn, *Necromancy in Naat,* took third place, with Hamilton's and Moore's tales following. Virgil Finlay's art work is without a doubt superb. I often find myself wondering how he would be on the cover. De Lay's illustration for Hamilton's yarn, *When the World Slept,* is certainly a humdinger. I'll close with an appeal for that plucky, inimitable Frenchman, Jules de Grandin."

Keep It Weird

Arel Rusl, of Mount Vernon, Illinois, writes: "Here goes the first letter that I have written to this department in ten years of reading your most excellent magazine. I think it's about time one of your old fans got into the swing of things by telling what he thinks of old WT in general and the July issue in particular. Vampires are my particular dish and I like short shorts; so two of your fairly recent yarns stick in my mind, namely, *The Horror Undying* and *The Amulet of Hell.* Both were swell and I think we should see more from those authors. The best tale in the July issue seemed to me to be *The Kelpie.* For sheer horror and originality it has few peers. *The Unborn* and *When the World Slept* tie for second place, but all the stories were up to standard, which is tantamount to the highest praise. . . . Well, I suppose this is enough for the first letter. And are you surprized to note the lack of

brick-bats? You see, WEIRD TALES suits me just fine. No complaints, just keep up the good work and, to repeat a pæan as old as my acquaintance with WT, *Keep* WEIRD TALES *weird.*"

Again and Again

Charles Donnelly, of Johnson City, Tennessee, writes: "I've always enjoyed WEIRD TALES a lot and I think I have proved it by my consistent reading of it. The tale that I've enjoyed best lately was *Child of the Winds* by that superb writer Edmond Hamilton. It fascinated me so that I read it again and again. Mr. Hamilton's style of writing is one that keeps me fascinated until the end of the story. And that is some praise, because there are so few writers that can do that. I think that this story calls for a sequel because I don't believe Lora will be happy until she is back on the plateau with her friends. . . . I sincerely thank WEIRD TALES for so many enjoyable hours. It takes one out of this humdrum world into a place of dreams. The only fault I ever found with it was when it just printed every other month. I hope that won't happen again, because a month is too long to wait for WEIRD TALES, and two months is eons."

Then and Now

Joseph Allan Ryan, of Cambridge, Maryland, writes: "Do WT readers ever stop to observe how far WEIRD TALES has traveled since its inception? Let's take an early issue of WT—the October 1925 one, for instance—and compare it with the latest one. First of all we have J. U. Giesy's humorous pseudo-scientific tale, *The Wicked Flea*—a highly illogical story of a flea that grew to a gigantic size and went chasing big dogs all over the country; it relied on silly names and one solitary pun to give it humor(?). Then there was Seabury Quinn's *The Horror on the Links*, the first de Grandin story. Although this tale showed Quinn's superiority in the field of weird story writing, it was not so interesting as are his present de Grandin tales, for it gave a scientific explanation to each phenomenon, whereas today we find only indications of the occult in Quinn's masterpieces. *The Prophet's Grandchildren*, by E. Hoffmann Price, was, though interesting, not weird, for it merely retold a legend of the Moslems. . . . *The Fading Ghost*, by Willis Knapp Jones, started as though it was going to be a real WT short-story clas-

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sic, but ended up with a surprize ending which explained everything as a mistake which could never be incurred. Tom Freeman's *The Death Shower* was only a cleverly constructed detective story, *not* weird; while *A Mind in Shadow*, by Tessida Swinges, was a simple child's story, related in baby-talk, which could not have been even remotely connected with WEIRD TALES—it should have been rejected, instead, by Child Life Magazine. The Weird Story Reprint, Wilhelm Hauff's *The Severed Hand*, had a touch of weirdness to it, but was ruined by a weak ending; moreover, the title bore little relation to the story. There were other stories by authors who were, no doubt, prominent and popular at the time, but most of whom have dropped into the background. The illustrations, both inside and on the cover, were all done, very crudely, by a sole illustrator, Andrew Brosnatch. Compare his efforts with the present exquisite work of Virgil Finlay and Mrs. Brundage, with the detailed, clear-cut drawings of Harold De Lay, the shadowy, mysterious grease-pencilings of Hugh Rankin. Notice, too, the wide variety of artists—the early WTs had but one. The July, 1936, issue was almost a direct contrast to the early issue of 1925 which I reviewed. Clark Ashton Smith's scintillant gem—Robert E. Howard's tale of the barbarian, Conan—Edmond Hamilton's fascinating weird-scientific tale of the near future—Thorp McClusky's *different* vampire thriller—August W. Derleth's narrative of spirit return, proof of his never-failing mastery—the handsome Manly Wade Wellman's short tale of stark horror, nearly approaching the point reached by Kuttner's *The Graveyard Rats*—the beautiful inside illustrations and the excellent cover—the usual array of interesting letters in the Eyrie—all these rounded up an issue which was as nearly perfect as an issue can be, and which was yet typical of the standard maintained in the last five years. And still some readers yearn for the 'good old days'!"

Another de Grandin Tale

Robert A. Madle, of Philadelphia, writes: "*Necromancy in Naat* was a good story, beautifully illustrated by Virgil Finlay. His fantastic drawings are in fitting with the magazine—they are *weird*. Without a shadow of a doubt Virgil Finlay is your best interior artist. De Lay, your recent addition, is also good. Robert E. Howard's latest Conan adventure takes first place. I have yet to be displeased by Howard, and I hope he never stops writing for WEIRD TALES. Second place goes to that unusual yarn, *The Unborn*. This story presents a decidedly weird plot excellently written. It is a great improvement over Ronal Kayser's previous contributions. The other tales were very good, especially *Lost Paradise* by C. L. Moore. Moore never fails to please me with those beautiful tales of Northwest Smith. Do you realize that there hasn't been a Jules de Grandin story in the last six issues and next month's forecast doesn't boast of one either? You had better rectify the situation and secure one soon." [Cheer up, Mr. Madle, for two new tales of Jules de Grandin will appear soon, with cover designs by Margaret Brundage.—THE EDITOR.]

Varied Comments

Paul N. Nicholaioff, of Chicago, writes: "I find real treat when I read Seabury Quinn and Carl Jacobi. The former's *A Rival from the Grave* and the latter's *Face in the Wind* were excellent. McClusky's *Loot of the Vampire* is very entertaining. *The House of the Evil Eye* I did not like so well. Its conclusion was mechanically constructed. It went off at a fair start, but something else finished the race. *Ballad of the Wolf* was an excellent poem by Henry Kuttner. I hope to see more of his poems in future issues."

Unique Among Magazines

Herberte Jordan, of Wellingborough, England, writes: "I have been a deeply appreciative reader of WEIRD TALES for many years, and would like to express my sincere admiration for the high literary quality of the stories published. Year in and out this quality is maintained, and the success of WEIRD TALES is undoubtedly due to this fact. The brilliant writers regularly contributing to the magazine are past masters in the art of inducing those delicious shudders which run up the spine and set the scalp tingling with suspense and horror. I would also mention the work of the artists illustrating WEIRD TALES. The Brundage covers are beautifully done, and the recent work by Virgil Finlay is superb. The Eyrie is a good feature and should, as Louis C. Smith stated

in a recent issue, be used solely for constructive criticism, not silly haggling. Whatever adverse criticism is made against WEIRD TALES, it is indisputable that it has reached, and is maintaining, a very high standard of weird literature. WEIRD TALES stands alone. It is indeed unique in every respect. From the first page to the last, one is transported into a world of eery fantasy where whispering voices hint unutterable horrors."

More Stories by Lovecraft

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "Congratulations on the July WEIRD TALES, the best job you've turned out in many a moon. That issue came close to perfection. All of the stories were fine, in fact, with one exception. *Loot of the Vampire* was by far the most poorly written, atrocious and terrible piece of work that I have ever had the displeasure of reading in your fine magazine. The plot was weak, the characters unconvincing and the sequence of events very 'spotty' in places. A child of twelve could scarce find entertainment in that one. The other tales, however, were all of such a fine quality that it is hard to pick the best ones. *Lost Paradise, Necromancy in Naat* and *Red Nails* are tales that transport the reader out of the 'everyday' and carry him over countless dream-worlds and realms of enchantment. Tales of this type are all too scarce these days. *The Unborn* was a strong and appealing little story, undoubtedly Kayser's best to date. *When the World Slept,* by Hamilton, was thought-provoking and perhaps not too impossible in these days of scientific progress. And speaking of Hamilton, his *Child of the Winds,* in May, was one of the finest tales you have ever given us. The short-shorts were the best in months, *The Kelpie* by Wellman and *The Snakeskin Cigar-Case* being the best of these. The latter was, decidedly, an 'off the trail' story, which might have taken first place had it been longer. At any rate, it was a damn good yarn and if Bodo Wildberg has any more as good, send them along. Conan Doyle's reprint, *The Ring of Thoth,* was the best tale of ancient Egyptian mummies that I have ever had the pleasure of reading. By the way, Mr. Editor, when, if ever, are we going to have any more tales by Lovecraft? Apparently, Robert Bloch has been trying to pinch-hit for Lovecraft for you, but he is an easy out. I'm sure no one can fill Lovecraft's

NEXT MONTH

Witch-House

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shoes with most of us readers. We miss his Elder Gods, and how!" [Two fine new stories by H. P. Lovecraft, *The Haunter of the Dark* and *The Thing on the Door-Step*, are scheduled for early publication. — THE EDITOR.]

Pointed Paragraphs

Donald A. Wollheim, of New York City, writes: "Am always pleased to see Robert Bloch's stories. That young man has certainly qualified himself for a permanent place on your list of outstanding authors. He carries on the Lovecraft tradition. And, by the way, where *is* the grand master HPL himself, these days?"

James P. Harrill, of Charlotte, North Carolina, writes: "I still enjoy reading your magazine as much as always and *still want you to continue the nudes on the front of the magazine*, although I am now a settled married man. Also I do not think that it hurts the prestige of your magazine to have an occasional detective or science-fiction story; in fact, I do not like the absolutely *weird* tales that have awesome sliminess oozing from the putrid bodies of something-or-other. Let's not make the stories too nasty; although I have as good a stomach as any man's, I do not like to read stories like that."

R. M. Tomlinson, of Ventura, California, writes: "In the June issue, I was much pleased with the drawing signed by H. S. DeLay. Don't know when I have seen such real skill in this sort of magazine."

Robert Bloch, of Milwaukee, writes: "Robert E. Howard's death is quite a shock —and a severe blow to WT. Despite my standing opinion on Conan, the fact always remains that Howard was one of WT's finest contributors, and his King Kull series were among the most outstanding works you ever printed."

Seabury Quinn writes from Brooklyn: "The field of fantastic fiction has lost one of its outstanding and recognized masters in Robert E. Howard. His Solomon Kane stories, his tales of Kull, and latterly his Conan sagas, all of them were superb in their own way. He was a quantity producer, but always managed to keep his stuff fresh and vigorous. There are few who can do this."

Jack Snow, of Dayton, Ohio, writes: "I have just finished reading the July WEIRD TALES and have laid it aside with mingled feelings. The story I liked best was Manly Wade Wellman's *The Kelpie*. It was an out and out weird tale, not an adventure or thrill story masking behind a weird jargon."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Write a letter, or fill out the coupon on this page, and send it to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES. Your favorite stories in the July issue, as shown by your votes and letters, were the first part of the late Robert E. Howard's story, *Red Nails*, and Clark Ashton Smith's fantasy, *Necromancy in Naat*.

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Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

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COMING NEXT MONTH

FROM the black woods beside the trail rose a shriek of blood-curdling laughter. Slavering, mouthing sounds followed it, so strange and garbled that at first I did not recognize them as human words. Their unhuman intonations sent a chill down my spine.

"Dead men!" the inhuman voice chanted. "Dead men with torn throats! There will be dead men among the pines before dawn! Dead men! Fools, you are all dead!"

Ashley and I both fired in the direction of the voice, and in the crashing reverberations of our shots the ghastly chant was drowned. But the weird laugh rang out again, deeper in the woods, and then silence closed down like a black fog, in which I heard the semi-hysterical gasping of the girl. She had released Ashley and was clinging frantically to me. I could feel the quivering of her lithe body against mine. Probably she had merely followed her feminine instinct to seek refuge with the strongest; the light of the match had shown her that I was a bigger man than Ashley.

"Hurry, for God's sake!" Ashley's voice sounded strangled. "It can't be far to the cabin. Hurry! You'll come with us, Mr. Garfield?"

"What was it?" the girl was panting. "Oh, what *was* it?"

"A madman, I think," I answered, tucking her trembling little hand under my left arm. But at the back of my head was whispering the grisly realization that no madman ever had a voice like that. It sounded—God!—it sounded like some bestial creature speaking with human words, but not with a human tongue! . . .

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A grim tale of the weird terror that wrought ghastly death and panic at Brubaker Farm—by the author of "Loot of the Vampire."

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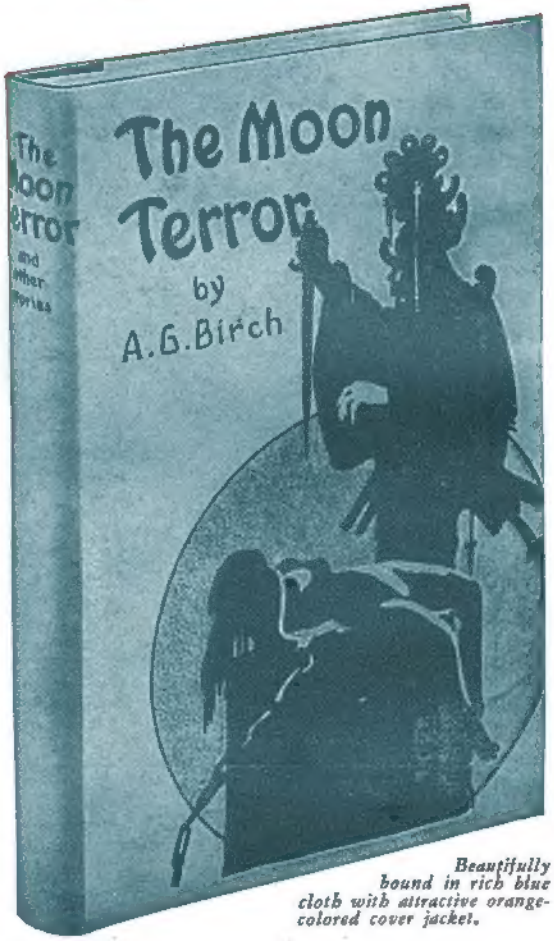

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